Invasion of Hellgard

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Dakota Frandsen

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First Printing, 2026

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CONTENTS

1 | Abyss 1

2 | New Start 30

3 | Fire 51

4 | And Flames 76

5 | Bring Inferno 104

6 | Thy Flesh… 137

7 | CONSUMED 160

8 | No Rest Living 187

9 | Shores of Hellgard 219

10 | Damnation 242

11 | Genesis 264

ABOUT THE AUTHOR 273

1

Abyss

The gargantuan transport ship, a black silhouette against the distant, star-dusted velvet of space, vibrated with a deep, low, constant hum, a deep thrumming sensation that resonated through the soles of its diverse array of passengers. The journey had been long, the silence of the void occasionally punctuated by the mechanical sighs of the massive vessel. Within its cavernous interior, a society in miniature was crammed, each individual a cog in the vast machine of the Sol Union Corp's off-world expansion.

Soldiers with unreadable, stoic faces sat interspersed with lawyers, who were hunched over their digital case files with a mix of concentration and weariness. The soldiers, veterans of countless skir-

mishes on various frontier worlds, were as solid and unyielding as the alloy walls surrounding them. Their fatigue was internal, a spiritual exhaustion that no amount of rest could cure. The lawyers, in contrast, carried the weight of civil battles, their anxieties manifesting in the feverish tap-tap-tap of their fingers on holographic keyboards, their faces illuminated by the cool blue light of their open briefs.

Amidst them were Sol Union Corp lab technicians, their new, futuristic uniforms looking stiff and uncomfortable, their bodies visibly trembling with a combination of fear and unfamiliarity. These were the pioneers of the corporation's next great leap, yet they looked more like lambs being led to slaughter than explorers. Their scientific curiosity was battling a very human terror of the unknown, of a Martian soil that held no promises, only danger. Each group, though distinct in their purpose, shared the common bond of this journey, propelled forward into an uncertain future. The ship was a melting pot of ambition, fear, and reluctant duty.

A solitary figure, William Thompson, sat apart from the rest, a palpable aura of brooding quietude surrounding him. He occupied a corner seat, a self-imposed island of isolation. His profile, etched in the subdued cabin lighting, was one of grim intensity. His gaze remained fixed on the training videos flickering across the surface of his personal tablet, the harsh glow illuminating his intense features. The tactical simulations and operational briefings offered no comfort, only a sharp focus, a deliberate mental discipline to ward off the encroaching ghosts of his past. Taller than the average man, his broad shoulders seemed to carry an unspoken burden, a silent testament to a life lived, replete with experiences that had shaped him into the man he was today. Every movement was economical, every muscle group tense, coiled like a spring. The weight of his past seemed to press down on him, visible in the slight slump of his shoulders and the faraway look in his eyes. He was a man running not from a place, but from a memory.

Ten years prior, the weight on William's shoulders had been nothing more than the gentle heft of a summer afternoon. A memory, golden and frag-

ile, played behind his closed eyelids. A vastly different William had reclined in the worn comfort of an old, rope-strung hammock. The world was smaller then, contained within the boundary of a suburban yard and the calm surface of a nearby lake. The gentle, rhythmic lapping of the lakeside against the shore had provided a serene backdrop to his quiet contentment. The scent of pine and fresh water filled the air. The golden afternoon sun had dappled through the leaves of the overarching trees, painting shifting patterns on the ground.

It was in this idyllic scene that Anna, his beloved wife, had approached him, her eyes brimming with an overflowing love that mirrored his own. She was the anchor of his world, her presence a promise of peace. Their young son, Flynn, a spirited boy of nine, had been playfully shouting, "Fucking tear! Fucking tear!" his innocent voice echoing with mock ferocity as he pretended to be a monstrous creature, his small hands clawing at the air. The profanity, learned from some schoolyard encounter, was delivered with such unselfconscious glee that it only added to the humor. Laughter had filled the air, a melody of pure joy

that had resonated deeply within William's soul. A perfect, unblemished moment.

Later, in the hushed tranquility of the master bedroom of their suburban home, a profound sense of isolation had settled upon William. The quiet of the house, usually comforting, now felt empty, echoing with an unnerving silence. He found himself alone, his fingers tightly clutching a small, unassuming card. It was a relic from a friend's passing, a sad souvenir tucked away in an old wallet. Its message, stark and unsettling in its simplicity, had pierced through the domestic calm: "The Demons Must Never Win. If You Need Help, Call," followed by a suicide hotline number. The words, intended as a life raft for another, had struck William with a sudden, personal chill. The words had been a cold splash of water, jarring him from the warmth of his memories, leaving him with a chilling premonition that he couldn't quite shake.

Days passed, and in the bright, sunlit yard of their suburban home, Flynn played with Anna, his joyful laughter ringing out across the perfectly manicured grass. The tableau was one of serene

domestic bliss, a picture of normalcy that William was about to shatter. His car then pulled into the driveway, its tires crunching softly on the gravel. The routine sound was jarring to his heightened senses. William emerged, a small, wicker carrier in his hand, containing a new family pet – a tiny, fluffy bunny named Daisy. It was a peace offering, a consolation prize for the absence he knew was coming.

Flynn, upon seeing his father, instantly abandoned his game, running towards him with an irrepressible, bubbling excitement. The joy on his son's face was a punch to William's gut. William knelt, bringing himself to his son's level, and with a gentle, almost melancholic smile, told him, "Daisy's gonna help look after you when I'm gone." The simple words carried a terminal weight. Anna, sensing the unspoken weight in his words, stepped forward and kissed her husband, a tender, lingering farewell that felt heavy with an unspoken understanding. It was not the casual kiss of a husband leaving for work, but the solemn embrace of a soldier departing for war. The sun continued to

shine, but a shadow had begun to fall over their otherwise perfect lives.

The broadcast studio, located in the dark, beating heart of the city, hummed with a nervous energy, the air thick with anticipation as the heavy man in the impeccably tailored suit leaned into the microphone. This was Reginald "Reggie" Thorne, the infamous host of *The Abyss Watch*, his face perpetually flushed with righteous indignation. His voice, usually a smooth instrument of persuasion, now resonated with a raw, guttural outrage, a rumbling cascade of accusation that filled every corner of the studio and spilled out to his waiting television audience. He didn't speak in veiled terms; he detonated his words. “The Sol Union Corp is sacrificing its own people to *the monsters* for power!” The accusation hung in the air, heavy and damning. “I’m not speaking metaphor, here, I mean it! My sources on the inside tell me people are disappearing, people are scared, and going berserk. There’s voices and glowing eyes!”

He paused, a visible effort to clear the sudden constriction in his throat, and took a long gulp of water from the glass on his desk. The moment of

silence was deafening, drawing the audience closer. Calmer now, his voice dropped, a conspiratorial whisper that nonetheless filled the studio, amplified and carried to millions. “Listen folks. I know many of you think I’ve gone off the deep end, but it is no secret for almost two hundred years that our world has been advanced from the work of genuinely evil sons-a-bitches. The Sol Union Corp is no different...” His eyes, dark and knowing, held the camera's gaze. A chill settled over the audience, a collective shiver of unease as the implications of his words began to sink in.

Across the city, as the first pale fingers of dawn stretched across the sky, a different kind of murmur filled the air at the military base. The base was a scene of controlled, poignant chaos. The air was thick with the bittersweet scent of goodbyes, a poignant mix of hope and apprehension. Anna and Flynn, a bit older now, their faces etched with a familiar sorrow, stood among the throngs of families, waving with a forced cheerfulness. Their smiles were brittle, on the verge of cracking. Flynn, ever the sensitive one, clutched his beloved pet Daisy, finding a strange, comforting solace in the

soft fur against his cheek. The small rabbit was a talisman against the encroaching fear. William, already in his crisp, new uniform, a symbol of his newfound commitment, blew kisses to his family as he boarded the transport plane, a fleeting image of their faces imprinted on his mind before he turned to join his unit, disappearing into the belly of the enormous aircraft. He didn't look back; he couldn't afford the luxury of regret.

Later, on an alien world bathed in the strange, bioluminescent glow of an unfamiliar night, William navigated the thick, unfamiliar terrain, his boots crunching on strange flora that pulsed with an eerie, rhythmic light. The planet was a canvas of surreal beauty and latent threat. The air was heavy with the scent of damp earth and something indefinable, yet distinctly alien. He was a stranger in a strange land, but his purpose was clear. He reached a vantage point just outside a human settlement, a cluster of hastily constructed shelters nestled amongst towering, serpentine trees.

His unit fanned out beside him, their hushed movements almost imperceptible in the alien darkness. Every soldier was a trained predator, ready

to strike. His commanding officer, an older man whose eyes had seen too much, whose face was a roadmap of countless battles, approached. His name was Sergeant Kelso, his voice already known for its cold, hard tone. A heavy silence hung in the air, broken only by the chirping of unseen creatures.

Then, the officer pulled out a radio, its static hiss a jarring intrusion. “Clear them out!” the officer barked into the comms, his voice devoid of emotion, a cold, hard command that sliced through the night. The word "them" hung there, heavy with ominous meaning. William's heart hammered against his ribs. He had assumed this was a retrieval mission, a protection detail.

A cold dread seized William, a paralyzing fear that froze him to the bone. The realization of the true nature of the mission was a shockwave. Panic flared, a white-hot spark igniting in his chest, threatening to consume him. He saw the lights of the settlement, small, flickering human-made lamps, and realized the "uncategorized humanoid population" were simply people. He lunged, a sud-

den, desperate blur of motion, tackling his commanding officer with an unexpected ferocity. The cold logic of duty was overwhelmed by the primal need for justice. Fists flew, a merciless rain of blows, each impact echoing in the silent night.

Other soldiers in his unit, stunned by the sudden, inexplicable outburst, moved to intervene, their weapons raising. The unit's loyalty was to the chain of command. But William, fueled by a primal fury, a desperate need to protect the innocent, fought them off, a whirlwind of desperation and righteous anger. He knew he was sealing his own fate, but the alternative was a moral death. He aimed his rifle, the familiar weight a comfort in his shaking hands, and the alien night was shattered by the staccato rhythm of gunfire as a few members of his own unit fell, their cries silenced by the terrible choice he had made.

Later, the chaos had subsided, replaced by a grim silence. The alien night was littered with the bodies of men. William, battered and bruised, but with a strange, defiant glint in his eyes, was subdued. The remaining soldiers had overpowered him, their initial shock giving way to grim profes-

sionalism. He was secured in a makeshift cage by the remaining soldiers of his unit, their faces a mixture of confusion, anger, and a reluctant respect. They saw a traitor, but some saw a broken hero. Then, with a jarring lurch, he was loaded onto a transport ship, its engines humming a low, mournful tune. His alien captivity had begun, a solitary journey into an unknown future.

Days later, the sharp, final sound of a gavel echoed through a courtroom, a reverberating shock that rippled through the gathered spectators. The proceedings had been swift, brutal, and highly publicized. The verdict was in, and it was devastating. The charge of treason had stuck.

Back in the recording studio, the conspiracy host sat at his desk, his hand clapped over his mouth, his face a mask of profound disbelief as he read a transcript that had just been handed to him. The information was a bombshell. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” he began, his voice dumbfounded, his usual bravado replaced by a bewildered awe, “as I sit before you today, I am still trying to process what has literally just come in before airing.” He paused, his mind reeling. He

took a deep, steadying breath, his eyes scanning the words before him, trying to comprehend the enormity of the news.

"Our sources have just sent in information regarding the widely publicized court-martial hearing of Corporal William Thompson. As many of you know, Thompson is being accused of treason, among nearly a dozen other counts." The entire Sol Union Corp establishment had wanted him silenced. The broadcast flickered, a momentary glitch, a fleeting tremor in the transmission.

"Our sources have told us the reason for Thompson's actions was due to an order to execute a small, uncategorized humanoid population." The truth, smuggled out by a conscience-stricken clerk, was finally exposed. The screen behind him shifted, displaying a haunting image of the alien village, now in ruins, a testament to the brutality that had almost occurred. The tragedy was palpable. "The video you are seeing here is believed to be the aftermath of the attack. It is believed the locals managed to evacuate, after hearing Corporal Thompson open fire on his fellow soldiers to stop the onslaught." A collective

gasp swept through the studio, a wave of shock and dawning realization. The truth, in all its horrifying glory, was finally out.

Outside the courthouse, the futuristic city street pulsed with a violent roar. The mob, initially fueled by corporate propaganda, now raged with misdirected fury. A tide of protesters, their faces contorted, screamed themselves hoarse. The establishment had branded William a monster, and the crowd believed it. A woman, her features twisted into a mask of pure fury, thrust her face into a news camera. "William Thompson is nothing but a psychopathic monster and a traitor," she shrieked, her words swallowed by the enraged chorus. "Men like him need to be extinct!"

The quiet suburban home offered no sanctuary. The suburban fortress had been breached by the outside world. In the dim light of the bedroom, William hunched at the side of the bed, a broken figure. The acquittal, won by the clandestine release of the truth, had not granted him peace. Anna, her eyes swimming with sorrow, tried to comfort him, clutching a framed photo of William and Flynn. The picture captured a decade-old mo-

ment of simple happiness. “Like Father, Like Son,” read the cheerful caption, a cruel mockery of the present. “You can get through this, hun,” Anna murmured, her voice raw. “You were already found innocent, just please don’t give in.”

The bedroom door creaked open, and a young, worried Flynn poked his head into the crack. The sight of his son was the only thing that could break through William's despair. William looked up, a fragile smile gracing his lips. “Hey bud, come here!”

Flynn’s face brightened, and he started to approach his father.

Then, a man appeared at the bedroom window, smashing it with a pistol. The fragile peace shattered with the glass. William exploded into action, a primal instinct taking over. The protector surged forward. Anna screamed, grabbing Flynn and fleeing. William tackled the intruder, throwing him against the wall with a force that shattered a large weapons safe, revealing a double-barrel shotgun. It was an antique, a piece of old Earth weaponry. William snatched it up, leveling the barrel at the intruder.

"You fucking bastard!" William roared.

"William, NO!" Anna shrieked from the hallway, Flynn clutched tightly in her arms. Her cry was not for the intruder, but for the man her husband was becoming.-----The next morning, the suburban street was unnervingly silent. The evidence of the previous night's violence had been swiftly and discreetly cleared. William stood alone, the crisp air doing little to soothe the turmoil in his chest as he read Anna's goodbye letter. The paper trembled in his hands, a final, agonizing verdict.

William,

I know that this road has been hard on you; but seeing who you've become after what happened scares me. I know you'd never intentionally hurt me or Flynn, but with the house broken into and the people stalking us, it's just not safe!

Tears blurred the words, the crushing weight of his guilt pressing down. He understood her fear; he was afraid of himself. He continued to read, the letter a testament to the chasm opening between them.

I don't want Flynn to come to harm because of this. When you attacked that man, I know in my

heart you were just trying to protect us! But I can't take the risk! I'm taking Flynn to my parents for the weekend and to think things over. It may be time for us to go our separate ways.

William started back towards the house, the paper trembling in his hands.

If it does come to it, you have my word that I will not keep Flynn away from you and I won't speak ill of you with him. The boy needs his father, and you need him just as much to remind you of the amazing human being you are inside. Please know that I am not doing this because I have fallen out of love with you. Not after everything we've been through. Forever and always, Anna

In the recording studio, the conspiracy host sat behind his desk, a rare note of sadness in his demeanor. The focus had shifted from William's crime to the forces that had driven him to it. "Sometimes in this world, the good people who try to do the right thing are attacked... or worse."

He held up a grainy, sepia-toned image: a WWII-era wanted poster, featuring a grim-faced military man labeled "Benjamin Thompson." The caption beneath the name read: "Traitor to the

Cause." Then two more, from the 1970s, depicting "Trouble Twins" Jess and Soph Thompson. The twins were shown in a grainy newspaper clipping, linked to anti-government activism.

"Just like what Nazi sympathizers tried to do to US Army Ranger Captain Benjamin Joseph Thompson and his family..." Reggie's voice was low, conspiratorial. The image shifted to an 1980s photograph of a radio newscaster. The man's face was earnest, a smile fixed on his lips. "And with what some believe led to the mysterious disappearance of heroic newscaster and whistleblower Arthur Thompson." The screen changed again, showing a 2020s missing person's poster, an eccentric tycoon type. "And the strange stories of leading space industry mogul Willie Arthur Thompson back in 2023. William Thompson is yet another man whose life was tested and thrown to the side by corruption..." The implication was clear: the Thompson family had been targeted by a shadowy organization for generations.

Later, in the futuristic city street, bathed in the glow of neon, William stood by a mailbox, a letter clutched in his hand. The decision was made. He

was leaving. He dropped it in, then loaded a bag into the back of a sleek, futuristic truck. The vehicle was anonymous, the perfect escape vessel.

Anna,

I do not blame you for running away. I would too if I was in your shoes. Flynn doesn't deserve this life and at this time I am not sure if I can escape it with everything that has happened.

He slid into the truck, his gaze lingering on his family home one last time. The windows were dark, the lawn too perfect.

Whatever you decide, I will honor it to the best of my ability. I've left a few things behind for you to decide what to do with as you see fit. They're mainly just some old clothes and some other hand-me-downs for Flynn. The boy is gonna grow out of what he has faster than we realize.

A wry chuckle escaped him as he started the engine, pulling away from the curb.

I've also left my old shotgun. I'm not quite sure what to do with it just yet as I was planning on giving it to Flynn once he was old enough. It probably scares the hell out of you, and I won't judge you otherwise. Whatever it is you decide to do, just be care-

ful and do not be afraid to call me if you or Flynn need me. You know I'll always come.

The bleak apartment offered little comfort. It was a temporary stop, stripped bare of any personality. William sat on an old couch, scanning the finality of divorce papers. The signature was a final, painful act of letting go. His memory seemingly faded into his present day as a ping on his electronic tablet broke the silence and his concentration. He was on the transport ship again, but the ping brought him back. A video message from Flynn, older now, a young man. The sight of his son was a ray of light in the gloom. William opened it, a genuine smile softening his features.

The video flickered to life, showing a university hallway. Flynn was dressed in a worn hoodie, a backpack slung over one shoulder. Flynn, his face close to the camera, nervously adjusted his phone, fidgeting with his hair.

"Hey dad!" he began, a strained cheerfulness in his voice. "Sorry about not responding quicker, school's just been hammering on me, haha." He tried to keep it light. He looked down, took a deep breath, and met the camera again. "I, uh, heard

from ma about your new job. Security on Mars, huh? I do hope it works out for you. Just watch out for yourself, alright? I know it's probably just a bunch of wacko conspiracy theories but that Sol Union Corp just seems off. But if anybody can handle if something goes sideways, it's you, dad. I'm proud of you."

A woman's voice called from the background, Vanessa Franklin, Flynn's girlfriend. "Flynn, babe, come on we're gonna be late!"

Flynn grinned at the camera. "Just a sec, I'm just recording a video message for my dad!" He took a quick breath. "And, I know it might be a while before I hear from you again, no worries. But, uh... that was Vanessa and... things are getting pretty serious..." He glanced around, as if checking if Vanessa was within earshot. "I know it sounds crazy, but, I've been thinking about asking her to marry me. No, I haven't told Mom yet. It's just something I wanted to talk to you about first. So, if you get a second, got any advice? Like I said, no rush, I know you got things to settle into."

Flynn started walking down the hallway. "Anyway, I got to get going. Again, good luck fighting

off Martians!" He finished with a heartfelt, "I love you, Dad."

William chuckled at his son's message. A flicker of true happiness crossed his face. The man sitting next to him, Private First Class Thomas Frandsen, nudged him. "Sorry, just hate these long flights without much to do. Was that your boy?"

William sighed, "Yep, he's all grown up. Apparently has himself a little girlfriend."

Thomas smiled. "He seems like a good kid. You should be proud!"

William's gaze hardened for a moment, a flicker of his old annoyance at casual conversation. "He is. He had a good mom there to keep him in line and not turn out too much like me." The self-deprecation was bitter.

Thomas chuckled, seemingly oblivious to the tension. "I'm sorry if I'm bugging you. My lady is expecting and told me she was gonna tell me the gender when I got back."

The tension drained from William, replaced by a weary sigh. "Don't worry about it. I'm just nervous about starting a new job. Congrats on the kid."

"What brings you to the abyss?" Thomas asked, a hint of curiosity in his voice. The journey had been dubbed that by the crew.

William glanced over. "Seemed like it was a decent payday." The money was just a means to an end.

"I hear you man." Thomas paused, a sudden realization dawning on his face. "My apologies, Corporal. I didn't quite recognize you."

William stared at Thomas, a moment of confusion, then recognition. "Relax. That was a lifetime ago."

Thomas nodded, extending his hand. "Again, my apologies. My name is Thomas. Thomas Frandsen."

William gripped Thomas's hand, a firm handshake. "Corporal William Thompson, though I already suppose you knew that."

Thomas seemed unsure what to say next, scratching his head. "So, what is it that brings you to Mars?"

Thomas smiled, thankful for the icebreaker. "I'm just getting back from a protection detail; escorting a some wacked out scientist out to the Sol

Union Corp on Pluto. Let me tell you something. I know they say those science types can be a bit screwy in the head, but if you ever get assigned to Melvin Bertonia…" Thomas looked around, as if what he was about to say next could get him in trouble. "Run like Hell, something ain't right about him. See if they'll send you to Venus or something. That base may be old scrap from the second world war, but maybe you'll find a good looking woman from there!"

William shook his head, a faint smile playing on his lips. "So, if you're gonna be eager to talk my ear off on this ride… Can you tell me any 'forbidden' knowledge corporate won't tell an FNG?"

Thomas nodded his head. "Honest? There's something weird going on. I don't know what or why, but there's a lot of people spooked and want to see Mars blown to bits."

A buzzer filled the air, and a light near the pilots flickered from green to red. "Attention. We are preparing for descent. Please fasten your seatbelts."

The hum of the transport ship's engines thrummed through the deck plates, a constant, low growl that did little to soothe the nerves of its

passengers. The atmospheric re-entry process, even with advanced technology, was always a violent affair. Every tremor, every groan of the stressed hull, sent a fresh jolt of anxiety through the crew.

Inside the cramped cabin, a tense silence had fallen, broken only by the occasional clink of gear or the rustle of uniforms. The soldiers and civilians alike braced themselves.

"Almost touchdown," Thomas announced, his voice a little strained, the usual easygoing lilt replaced by a professional, clipped tone. His veneer of casual friendliness had dissolved into sharp focus. His eyes, usually crinkling at the corners with amusement, were sharp and focused as he glanced at William, who sat beside him. "You ready?"

William, a knot of unease tightening in his stomach, managed a tight nod. He felt the familiar adrenaline, but it was mixed with a creeping dread. The atmosphere in the ship felt thick with anticipation, almost suffocating. "As much as I can be," he replied, his voice a little rough. "Anything else I need to know before we step onto this... glorious new assignment?" The sarcasm was a defense mechanism.

Thomas offered a small, almost imperceptible shrug. "Just don't let Sergeant Kelso gnaw your ass too hard. He gives all the new meat a hard time till they're beaten tender to his liking. Standard procedure for him." The name Kelso landed like a small, cold stone. A flicker of something, perhaps a shared understanding of past ordeals, passed between them.

William huffed, a quick, dismissive sound that held a hint of weary resignation. "So was my last C.O.," he muttered under his breath, the words barely audible over the ship's continued rumble. The ghost of the alien planet, and the man he had once been, was stirring.

Suddenly, a blinding, searing orange glow erupted from the ship's viewports, bathing the interior in an incandescent light. The ship was plunging through the thin Martian atmosphere. The raw, untamed power of atmospheric re-entry was on full display. Everyone on board squinted, their hands instinctively flying up to shield their eyes from the brutal glare, until the ship's advanced windows, with a subtle whir of unseen mecha-

nisms, tinted themselves, dimming the intense light to a manageable amber.

William's heart, already a frantic drum against his ribs, began to race even faster, his breathing becoming shallow and rapid. The violent sensory input was too much. The abrupt flash of light, the violent shaking of the ship, the distant roar of the engines – it was all a sudden, searing trigger. Memories of his last mission, the one that had torn his life apart, now flooded his mind, a relentless tide of fear and chaos. The scent of burning atmosphere morphed into the smell of blood and alien flora. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, trying to push the intrusive images away, trying to regain control.

The transport ship, now a roaring beast fighting against the planet's gravity, began to slow its descent, the faint crackle of radio transmissions confirming that the ship was cleared to land.

"All the fancy gadgets they come up with these days," Thomas quipped, a forced cheerfulness in his voice, attempting to lighten the mood as he saw William's distress. "Yet we still feel like we're gonna shoot a hole through the surface of Mars just trying

to get home to the missus!" He nudged William gently with his elbow, a gesture of concern.

William managed a small laugh, a hollow, reedy sound that held no genuine amusement. He appreciated the attempt, even if it didn't work. He was still haunted.

"Tell you what," Thomas continued, undeterred, a hopeful note in his voice, "you and I somehow manage to get the same day off, how about we blow off some steam in the commons area? There's a decent holo-arcade and a pretty good synth-ale on tap."

William tapped Thomas on the side, a gesture of camaraderie, a silent acceptance of the offer. "Whatever man. You watch yourself." The unspoken sentiment hung in the air: *We'll see if we even make it through this.*

With a final, bone-jarring jerk, the transport ship landed, the muffled thud echoing through the cabin as it settled into the docking bay of the Sol Union Corp. The journey was over, the assignment about to begin. The low hum of the engines ceased, replaced by the hiss of depressurizing seals and the distant clamor of the spaceport.

Almost immediately, people began to unbuckle themselves, a collective sigh of relief rippling through the cabin, and started to grab their bags from the overhead compartments, eager to disembark. The rush to escape the confinement was palpable. Thomas gave one last, encouraging wave to William, a quick grin flashing across his face, before disappearing into the throng of departing passengers.

William remained seated for a moment longer, the last one to leave, the weight of the new assignment, and the ghosts of the old, pressing down on him. He checked the straps on his gear, a meticulous preparation for a life he wasn't sure he wanted. He took a deep breath, steeling himself, and finally rose to face whatever awaited him beyond the ramp. Mars was a new world, but he carried his old hell with him.

2

New Start

William stepped out of the transport ship, the cold, thin Martian air a strange, dry kiss on his face that instantly chaped his lips. The massive, sprawling complex of the Sol Union Corp stretched before him, a labyrinth of reinforced steel and dull-red durasteel, all under a sky the color of old, oxidized rust. It was a monument to human ambition, built on a planet that seemed determined to reject it.

Another soldier approached, his heavy, magnetized boots clicking purposefully on the compressed regolith. He was tall, clad in the standard issue charcoal and crimson armor of the Sol Union Corp's internal militia, a stark contrast to William's own worn fatigues.

"Corporal Thompson?" the man asked, his voice a crisp, almost mechanical baritone that cut through the low whine of the base's atmospheric processors.

William sighed, the sound barely audible in the thin air. "Yeah, that's me." He offered his hand reluctantly, a common formality he'd hoped to skip, but followed through as the soldier extended his own gloved hand. The grip was firm and efficient.

"I've been asked by Sergeant Kelso to be your escort," the soldier continued, his helmet's visor an impenetrable black mirror reflecting the rusty sky. "Normally, you'd get a full day to acclimate, to get your Mars-legs under you, but there's an urgent matter at hand that requires your immediate assistance."

"What's going on?" William asked, the familiar, unwelcome knot of professional concern tightening in his gut. After two tours on Earth-side conflicts, he knew 'urgent' rarely meant anything good.

The soldier gestured for them to start walking towards the nearest airlock entrance of the sprawling base. "It's better if we walk and talk. The

Sergeant isn't exactly a patient man, especially when the clock is ticking on a high-value asset."

The journey began. The deep, resonant hums of distant transport ships landing and taking off, and the brief, overlapping, highly technical conversations of men and women in Sol Union Corp uniforms, echoed through the pressurized environment, audible but barely intelligible—a constant, stressful white noise. William clutched the worn canvas strap of his personal bag, feeling acutely out of place.

With a fluid, practiced motion that suggested a well-rehearsed combat readiness, the soldier reached back. His fingers brushed a specialized compartment built into the upper arm of his armor. With a soft, almost inaudible *shick*, a rifle seemed to materialize, growing from a compact, blocky form into its full, lethal size—a high-powered kinetic assault rifle—in the soldier's hands. The weapon felt like a magician's prop, appearing from nowhere.

"How the hell did you do that?" William asked, genuinely shocked and impressed despite himself. He'd seen a lot of tech, but nothing that seamless.

The soldier's helmet visor tilted slightly, a movement that conveyed a knowing smile and a glint of privileged access. "The Sol Union Corp has a very nice, very deep collection of toys we get to play with," he explained, his voice a low, satisfied rumble. "And if they like your work enough, you even get to help design and make them."

He continued walking, his movements utterly fluid and efficient, showing no strain from the armor or the rifle. With that same practiced ease, he reached into a compartment at his side—a space that, a second before, had looked completely solid and inert. He withdrew a small, foil bag of Earth-standard pretzels, offering them with a casual, almost bored gesture. "Hungry? You look like you haven't eaten a good meal since you left the orbiting station."

William, still captivated by the seamless way both the rifle and the pretzels had materialized from seemingly solid armor plating, accepted the bag. The illusion of depth and physical space was so utterly convincing; it was hard to believe the bag hadn't been physically present and just cleverly hidden.

"Even the most basic militia armor here is equipped with I.F. Storage Packs," the soldier continued, crunching on a pretzel. "I.F. stands for 'Infinite Field.' It's basically a localized, personal pocket dimension. It practically lets you carry a shopping mall without adding a single gram of mass or external bulk. Each item you store gets tagged by the system—weapons, food, first-aid kits—making it easy to find and retrieve on command, all controlled by a low-level neural network interface."

He tapped the back of his helmet with a gloved finger. "Some guys stick with the helmet for the neural interface, but after you're fully vetted and trusted—a process that takes a few months—they let you get a subdermal implant if you feel it would be easier. The tech is pretty sophisticated, almost indistinguishable from a natural thought when you call an item. Just do yourself a favor and try not to let your fingers get too close to the activation point when you're retrieving something, unless you want to lose one in the field." He chuckled, a dry, humorless sound that felt pro-

foundly unsettling and sent a definite shiver down William's spine.

Their walk ended at a pair of massive, imposing, reinforced metal doors, prominently labeled "ARRIVALS - PERSONNEL PROCESSING" in bold, black letters that glowed faintly.

"Step through here for your full medical and psychological checkup," the soldier instructed, his tone suddenly snapping back to official, military formality. He didn't wait for a response. Without another word, he veered off into a side corridor, disappearing through another door marked "STAFF ONLY," leaving William alone in the sterile, harshly lit corridor.

William took a deep breath, the lingering, stale recycled air from the transport shuttle still clinging to his clothes and hair. He hesitated for a long moment, feeling the familiar anxiety of entering a new, hostile environment, then pushed through the heavy, sliding metal doors.

The scent of antiseptic, sharp and clinical, immediately stung his nostrils, mixed with a faint, metallic tang he couldn't quite place—like ozone mixed with old blood. Before him, a massive,

curved glass window offered a panoramic, though highly restricted, view into the admissions office beyond. Within, two futuristic body scanners—sleek, vertical columns of polished white metal—hummed with a low, almost imperceptible electrical current, their forms hinting at advanced, privacy-violating diagnostics.

"Morning!" a voice boomed, startling William, who instinctively flinched, his hand momentarily tightening on his bag strap. The voice belonged to a broad-shouldered man with a perfectly shaved head, his face a mask of weary, bureaucratic efficiency. "Let's get this over with, Corporal. Just stand on one of the glowing red boxes and hold still. The more you twitch and move, the longer this tedious process takes for both of us."

William walked to one of the glowing red squares etched into the polished, obsidian-black floor, aligning his feet precisely with the faintly glowing diagram. He set his worn canvas bag down beside him, the rough material rustling softly against the pristine, almost gleaming tile. The scanning machine whirred to life with a deeper, more demanding hum, casting a faint, pulse-like crimson

glow over him, tracing his outline with invisible, penetrating beams.

"Alright, looks good... no unauthorized bio-implants, standard military loadout, minimal contaminants..." the Scan Tech mumbled, his gaze fixed on a monitor hidden from William's view behind a privacy screen.

A sudden, sharp radio call interrupted the calm, a violent burst of static crackling through the overhead speakers. "Fuck, not again," a different soldier muttered under his breath, his voice laced with pure, unadulterated frustration. He hurried to the Scan Tech's microphone console, slamming a button. Bits of the frantic radio transmission, now amplified and painfully loud, crackled through the speakers, sounding like a desperate struggle unfolding somewhere in the lower levels.

"Thompson, I've been dispatched to another location. Head to the front desk to check in... Sergeant Kelso is expecting you..." The words were abruptly cut off by the guttural, primal roar of a man echoing through the radio, immediately followed by the distinct sounds of a physical, violent struggle—metal impacting flesh, a crash, and a

strangled cry. The soldier, his face grim and white with alarm, didn't hesitate; he rushed out of the room, the heavy, reinforced door slamming shut behind him with a resounding *thud* that vibrated through the floor and up William's boots.

"I swear it's just getting worse and worse down here..." the Scan Tech grumbled, shaking his head slowly, a weary, almost defeated resignation etched deep on his features. He didn't even look up from his monitor.

Above the sliding doors leading into the front offices, a green light illuminated, casting a soft, 'all-clear' glow. "Just head on through," the Scan Tech said, his voice flat, devoid of any warmth or concern. "The front desk will tell you where you need to be. Good luck, you're going to need it."

William nodded slowly, a profound sense of foreboding settling over him, an unwelcome weight. He retrieved his bag, the worn canvas feeling heavier than before, and walked through the now-open sliding metal doors.

He entered a spacious, brightly lit reception area, the air slightly warmer and less clinical than the processing room. A welcome video played on a

large, wall-mounted monitor. Its smooth, synthesized female voice extolled the boundless virtues, opportunities, and the 'pioneering spirit' offered by the Sol Union Corp, a jarring, almost offensive contrast to the high-stakes urgency and barely suppressed panic he had just witnessed. William was still observing his new surroundings, taking in the gleaming, sterile surfaces and subdued, corporate lighting, when a woman's soft, yet clear, voice cut through the low hum of the environment. "Corporal Thompson?"

A woman with strikingly kind, intelligent eyes and a neat, professional bun, whose nameplate identified her as Marianne Fagin, sat at the reception desk. She waved him over with a gentle, inviting hand. He approached her, the low murmur of other voices echoing through the vast, impersonal space, each one a whisper of untold, complex stories.

"Apologies for the rushed processing," Marianne said, her voice softer and more genuine than the Scan Tech's. "You can set your bag right there; it'll be securely tagged and sent directly to your as-

signed quarters. We'll have your duty kit waiting for you."

William set his bag down, a slight sigh escaping him as he relinquished his last connection to his old life. "I'm told you'll be the one to direct me to Sergeant Kelso?"

The receptionist looked down at her monitor for a moment as another Sol Union Corp scientist, a woman in a perfectly tailored lab coat, walked by, offering her a friendly wave. “Morning, Dr. Hall,” Marianne said, nodding professionally. She turned back to William. “Yes, Sergeant Kelso has noted for you to bypass the standard base orientation and be sent directly to Militia Mission Command. Just take this keycard.”

Marianne reached into a drawer beneath the desk, pulling out a brand-new, bright red ID card. She pressed it to a sleek, networked device hooked to her computer, and William's name, rank, and a recently acquired digital image appeared on the keycard's digital display. “Don't lose this,” she warned, her eyes serious. “Our systems will automatically update its security profile to give you real-time access to all your authorized zones and

objectives. It's your life-line here." She handed him the keycard, its plastic still warm from the printer.

William found a small clip and attached the card securely to the breast pocket of his shirt. "Any questions before I send you on your way, Corporal?" Marianne asked.

"Just one," William said, his voice low. "Say things go to Hell—and I mean full, biblical, all-hands-on-deck Hell—what happens with my access permissions?"

"Ah, I see you've heard the rumors, then," Marianne sighed, a flicker of something troubled crossing her expression. She glanced quickly over her shoulder to see if any management was within earshot before looking back at William, leaning in conspiratorially.

"Yes, a Private Frandsen told me there's some people who want to see a hole shot through the surface of Mars and into our budget..." William offered, testing the waters.

Marianne shook her head, a subtle, almost endearing smirk playing on her lips. Her hand instinctively rubbed against her stomach, a small, protective gesture that instantly reminded William

of his ex-wife when she was pregnant with their son, Flynn. He couldn't help but smile faintly at the memory.

"He just doesn't know when to shut up, does he?" Marianne whispered, then quickly composed herself, her face returning to its professional mask. "Standard Procedure dictates that if there is an emergency deemed a Level 5—meaning total, system-wide failure or catastrophic attack—all accessways are to be instantly unlocked and unrestricted to allow all personnel to evacuate their station. However, for the Militia, your identification will be given authorization to *override* accessways for situations deemed a Level 3 and above. Corporate felt that given the sometimes unpredictable, volatile nature of Sol Union Corp operations and research, it would be best to ensure the militia would not be restricted by internal security protocols when attempting to contain a threat."

William nodded, taking in the gravity of that policy. "Good to know. It suggests they're expecting something worse than a standard containment breach." He pointed down a brightly lit hallway, where among a series of digital signs, one promi-

nently read "MILITIA COMMAND." "So, down that way, I assume?"

Marianne glanced in the direction William was pointing. Just then, a man who looked strikingly similar to the one William had spoken to earlier—presumably Private Thomas Frandsen—was in the hallway, looking back at Marianne with a deeply loving smile before walking away into a side office. A brief, soft red tint of a blush blossomed on Marianne's cheeks.

"Yes," she said, her voice a little brighter and firmer now. "Just follow the signs, and they'll take you straight to Militia Command. It's impossible to miss. If you get lost—which you shouldn't—any militia stationed along your route have been notified to assist you immediately."

William nodded and took a final, deep breath, still nervous but beginning to channel the anxiety into focus for the new job. "Thank you, Marianne. And, uh, good luck with the baby."

Marianne seemed genuinely shocked that William noticed, but a gentle, radiant blush spread across her cheeks as she smiled, a look of pure happiness. "Thank you, sir. How in the world did you

know I was pregnant? I thought I was hiding it well."

"I have a boy myself, all grown up now... but that little gesture just reminded me exactly of his mother a long time ago." William playfully winked at Marianne as another woman, an expediter, approached from behind him. The receptionist quickly handed her an orange, magnetic strap to secure to William's bag, directing her with a whisper where to drop it off.

William walked down the hallway, taking careful note of his surroundings, his military training taking over. Whispers already started filling the air from others walking the halls—scientists discussing anomalous energy readings, soldiers talking about strange patrol assignments.

William strolled through the sterile, overly bright corridors of the Internal Sol Union Corp base. The muted, deep-cycle hum of machinery was a constant companion, blending with the purposeful, heavy footsteps of soldiers and the quick, light steps of scientists. The air, thick with the scent of ozone, antiseptic, and recycled, filtered moisture, pressed in, a silent testament to the

colossal, relentless effort required to sustain human life on a world scarred by an unknown, ancient cataclysm.

He paused at the double-door entrance to the Commons area, a space clearly designed for brief, forced respite. Inside, three exhausted-looking soldiers slumped in ergonomic chairs around a table, attempting to decompress from the ever-present, grinding pressures of their duties.

A muted, official news broadcast flickered on a large television screen mounted high in the kitchen section of the Commons. A crisp, corporate voice, devoid of emotion, filled the air. "Sol Union Corp Corporate Offices would like to issue a formal statement regarding a recent, regrettable string of rumors pertaining to unusual activity throughout all arms of the corporation and its Martian facilities."

The screen displayed a male newscaster, his face a picture of placid, manufactured professionalism. Behind him, as a background graphic, a cartoon ghost danced mischievously over a digitally-enhanced Martian landscape, adding a layer of corporate mockery to the serious subject. "Due to

internal concerns and inquiries brought forth by Sol Union Corp staff," the newscaster continued, his tone condescending, "Corporate has sent a high-level team of researchers and specialists to investigate the various claims. Reports have ranged from employees feeling increasingly unsafe in their working conditions, to violent, unprovoked outbursts, and even, most amusingly, persistent reports of ghosts and anomalous spectres!" A ripple of manufactured, thin laughter escaped the newscaster's lips, clearly betraying the corporation's disbelief and dismissal of his own report.

"While the Sol Union Corp vehemently denies many of the sensational claims made by popular conspiracy programs and fringe news outlets," he stated, his voice regaining its corporate gravitas, "...internal investigations have already located, and swiftly dismissed, those few individuals who leaked sensitive, private company information to these programs. The Sol Union Corp would like to remind all staff that free and confidential resources to aid your physical and mental health are open, accessible, and strongly encouraged by all levels of management."

The news segued instantly into another, more mundane story about corporate bond yields, but William's attention had already drifted to the two soldiers at a nearby table.

"Hear that!" Soldier #2 chuckled, a nervous edge to his voice, nudging his companion with his elbow. "The corporate boys are sending out *ghostbusters*! We're all just crazy!"

Soldier #3 shivered visibly, a faint tremor running through him despite the warm air. "I don't know why you're laughing; there's something genuinely wrong going on, and even I'm getting the creeps. Have you been down by Delta Labs lately? The air feels heavy, and the shadows move."

"We're stuck in one of the most advanced science labs on a planet that was fundamentally wiped clean by some kind of ancient, unknown cataclysm that no one still has a clue about!" Soldier #2 scoffed, trying to sound rational. "That's creepy by itself! People are just getting worked up over nothing, listening to bad rumors."

"But have you *actually* been down by Delta?" Soldier #3 insisted, his voice barely a whisper, a

genuine fear in his eyes. “It’s not just rumors, it’s... a feeling.”

A throat cleared loudly at the entrance to the Commons, drawing all attention. “Well, at least I ain't afraid of no ghosts!”

William turned to find a man standing in the doorway: Dr. Taylor Hall, whom Marianne had just greeted, a secured, ruggedized tablet clutched tightly to his side. His eyes were sharp, analytical, and distinctly non-military.

“And who are you supposed to be, barging in like that?” Soldier #2 asked, a hint of territorial suspicion in his tone.

“I'm Dr. Taylor Hall,” the newcomer announced, his voice clipped, educated, and immediately authoritative, “one of the 'ghostbusters' the Sol Union Corp has officially dispatched to assess and contain the claims behind these increasing disturbances. I'm here to find facts, not spectres.”

“I thought the Sol Union Corp was writing it all off as crazy ghost stories, according to that broadcast that just played?” William Thompson interjected, his brow furrowed in confusion, stepping forward.

Hall sighed, pushing his wire-rimmed glasses up his nose, his gaze immediately falling upon Thompson's bright red ID card. "The official statement was crafted by the PR department to try and settle the public's nerves and address concerns from the Sol Union Corp's nervous business partners, Corporal Thompson. But the truth is, the internal corporate concern is very real, tracing the worst and most persistent of the highly credible reports directly to this particular base—your new home."

William nodded slowly, the pieces of the mystery clicking into place—urgency, high-level asset, ghosts.

"Now, if you'll come with me, Corporal," Hall continued, his voice firm and impatient, "we both need to get to Sergeant Kelso's Mission Command office ASAP. He's been waiting for your arrival for too long already."

"Wait, why me? Why do you need a grunt?" William asked, a flicker of professional apprehension in his eyes.

"Your assignment involves the disappearance of a key scientist, one of the original heads of this fa-

cility and a pioneer in certain technologies," Hall said sternly, his eyes locking onto William's. "It is believed that part of his vital, and highly destabilizing, research may be directly connected to the current disturbances and is absolutely vital to the future of this entire corporation. You're here to do the legwork. I'm here to find the science."

Hall didn't wait for another question. He turned on his heel and strode crisply out of the Commons, his tablet still tucked securely to his side.

"Yes, sir," William replied, falling into a quick, disciplined step behind the fast-walking scientist, leaving the skeptical soldiers behind.

Soldier #2 and Soldier #3 stared at the empty doorway in disbelief as Hall and Thompson vanished from the Commons, their destination the heart of the base's military operations: Militia Command. The low hum of the base suddenly seemed to drop, replaced by a profound, uncomfortable silence.

3

Fire

The central hub of the Militia Command at the Sol Union Corp Mars base was a cavern of subdued chaos, the metallic hum of its sophisticated systems a constant, low-frequency pulse. Staff members, their movements precise and practiced, were absorbed in the blue-white glow of their consoles, their faces a study in professional intensity as the Martian daylight, a fierce, dusty red, streamed through the expansive, reinforced viewport. The vista beyond was a desolate masterpiece—the ochre desert stretching to a hazy, indistinct horizon, a backdrop of stark isolation for the bustling activity within.

Dominating the space with an air of weary authority was Sergeant Kelso. His formidable cyber-

netic armor, a fusion of ceramic plating and glowing conduits, pulsed with a contained power, a silent testament to his long service. He surveyed the two newly arrived soldiers, Thompson and Hall, with an almost palpable wave of annoyance. For an organization built on military precision, the glacial pace of new recruits was a perennial source of irritation.

"You damn FNGs can't ever hurry your asses up, can you?" Kelso's voice was a low, gravelly rasp, heavy with suppressed frustration that seemed to vibrate in the air.

Thompson, a figure molded by discipline, snapped off a crisp, practiced salute, his movements economical and sharp. Hall, however, approached with an open hand, a gesture of casual camaraderie that seemed utterly out of place in the sterile military environment. Kelso dismissed the offering with a flicker of his eyes, his gaze locking onto Hall with the cold intensity of a targeting laser.

"Dr. Hall, there's a station set up for you to hold hands with the newbie," Kelso remarked, the sarcasm in his tone biting, a subtle jab at Hall's

apparent lack of military urgency. "The technician over there will help you link your tablet to the system mainframe, assuming your civilian tech can play nice with a secure military network."

As if summoned by an unseen cue, a technician, a woman whose every movement radiated focused efficiency, materialized at Kelso's elbow. Her uniform was immaculate, her expression unreadable. "Right this way, Dr. Hall. The initial sync protocols are already running."

Hall offered a brief, silent nod of acknowledgment, the open hand now dropping to his side, and followed her to a vacant computer station, its surface a nexus of blinking indicator lights. They immediately began the complex process of linking his personal tablet—likely loaded with proprietary research data—to the intricate, secure network of the command mainframe. With Hall efficiently occupied, Kelso's razor-sharp attention returned to Thompson.

"Here's the situation," he began, his voice dropping to a more serious, almost confidential register. The previous humor and biting sarcasm vanished, replaced by a steely, professional resolve. He cast a

quick, assessing glance over his shoulder at Hall's occupied form before returning his piercing gaze to Thompson. "As I'm sure you've heard through the inevitable scuttlebutt, a head Sol Union Corp scientist, Dr. Raymond, has gone missing. Last known sighting was near Delta Labs, specifically the decommissioned teleportation bays. It is believed that he was heading towards a decommissioned comms facility deep in the older sub-levels and was showing signs of what's been officially logged as a psychotic break."

Kelso paused, taking a deep, measured breath, the brief silence in their immediate vicinity punctuated only by the subtle, unwavering hum of the command center's ventilation and processors. "It's a bit of a trip to get there. You'll have to find your way to sublevel seven, and then get access through a series of maintenance shafts that are probably overdue for inspection. I've read your file, Thompson; the court-martial aside, you were a damn good soldier. Your orders are simple: Find him, secure him, and get him to the nearest infirmary for evaluation. Do not hurt him, unless he gives you ab-

solutely no other choice. This is a retrieval, not an execution."

Thompson absorbed the order, his expression a mask of professional neutrality. A flicker of something enigmatic—perhaps skepticism or resigned understanding—danced briefly in his eyes, a glimpse into the thoughts swirling beneath his composed exterior. "Yes, sir," he responded, his voice firm and unwavering, a model of military obedience.

"Now, before you get to go gallivanting across the base," Kelso continued, his voice regaining a touch of its earlier gruffness, "your first stop is the armory. In the event you have to use force—and Sol Union Corp being the contractor it is, sometimes likes to use the militia as their guinea pigs for 'field testing'—it'll be better that you have at least something to stand your ground. You're going into the old labs. Don't be a dumbass and shoot yourself with whatever half-baked experimental garbage they hand you."

A sudden, sharp burst of static and a crackle from Kelso's collar radio cut him off mid-sentence,

an abrupt and unwelcome intrusion into the burgeoning briefing.

"Sergeant Kelso, Dr. Carmack has requested your immediate presence in Weapons R&D – over," a disembodied voice reported through the static, the clipped professionalism failing to mask a subtle sense of urgency.

"It's about time they got that thing ready," Kelso muttered under his breath, a faint, almost eager hint of anticipation in his voice as he pressed the acknowledgement button near his collar. "I'm on my way, tell Carmack to have the specs ready."

He shifted his weight, his armor servos whining softly, taking a brief, almost imperceptible breath before looking back at Thompson, his gaze once again sharp and direct. He grunted, a sound that served as a clear, unmistakable dismissal. "Get to the elevator shaft you passed on your way here. That'll lead you to the armory. Get your gear, find Raymond, and you better be beaten to a pulp before coming to me with any excuses of screwing around!"

William Thompson, his posture rigid and impeccable in the Sol Union uniform, brought his

hand to his brow in a final, perfect salute to the departing sergeant.

"Dismissed."

Deimos Classified Operations Sector

Towards another, far more sinister part of the Sol Union Corp's operations, a terrifying plot was rapidly unfolding. Unbeknownst to Thompson, Hall, or Kelso, the Martian moon, Deimos, had been converted into a 'classified operations sector'—a remote staging ground for research that strayed far beyond ethical or sane boundaries.

The air in the Sol Union Corp's Deimos Classified Operations meeting room was thick, almost suffocating, with the metallic tang of unspoken, mounting tension. Around the long, gleaming silver table, a small team of scientists fidgeted restlessly, their hushed, anxious whispers abruptly silenced as Dr. Alicia Neurton entered. Each step she took was accompanied by the faint, rhythmic *whir* and *click* of her futuristic, specialized exoskeleton, a sleek marvel of engineering that compensated for her severe scoliosis and allowed her to move with an almost unnatural, predatory precision. A stark, penetrating callousness permeated

the room, a chilling atmosphere that seemed to emanate from every corner, save for one lone, pale-faced scientist who still clung to a flickering ember of ethical humanity.

"Afternoon all," Dr. Neurton's voice, though perfectly clear, held a brittle, almost crystalline edge that allowed no room for dissent. "Let's get through with this meeting quickly as we have another expedition scheduled to the site." She placed a small, sleek, obsidian-colored device on the table. With a touch of her finger, a three-dimensional, hyper-realistic hologram shimmered to life above it: an immense, undeniably ancient structure of alien origin, spiraling into the simulated air with impossible geometry.

"Now, according to the latest translations provided by Dr. Gerald," Neurton continued, her gaze fixed on the ethereal, horrifying edifice, "This structure may contain incredibly valuable artifacts pertaining to the native life in Helgard—specifically, a means to control or harness their emergent psychic abilities. We are to expect heavy resistance from the natives, as well as, regrettably, other inter-

ested parties who have been monitoring our activity."

A male scientist, his face a mask of barely concealed derision and terror, cleared his throat, a sound that seemed deafening in the sudden quiet. "This is insane!" he scoffed, his voice dripping with mockery and fear. "Who else would be interested in even touching that place, and how would they even know about it!"

Dr. Neurton's perfectly sculpted lips tightened, her face momentarily squishing in an expression of cold annoyance. "Ever since we started conducting these highly... sensitive expeditions," Scientist #2 pressed on, visibly emboldened by his own desperation, "strange things have been happening in this base, subtle psychic disturbances, people acting irrationally. Yet no one is seeing the connection? How long before something goes fundamentally wrong? Isn't that why they shipped off Dr. Melvin Bertonia to God-forsaken Pluto and started binding up the teleportation experiments in Delta labs—because he saw the truth!?"

The other scientists, sensing the storm brewing within Dr. Neurton, fell into a collective, terrified

silence. Then, an unsettling sound began to emanate from their throats—a low, rhythmic, unsettling drone, a collective, guttural murmur.

Kill Him, a disembodied whisper, chillingly distinct and profoundly deep, echoed in the sudden, charged quiet of the room.

Dr. Neurton moved with unnerving fluidity, her exoskeleton providing silent, perfect balance as she walked behind Scientist #2. She placed her left hand on his shoulder, her touch unsettlingly cold through the fabric of his lab coat. Scientist #2 flinched violently, shrinking under her intense, unwavering gaze. "My apologies, Dr. Neurton, I..." he stammered, his bravado instantly evaporating, replaced by raw intimidation.

"Your concerns are noted, Doctor," she replied, her voice dangerously calm, devoid of any genuine warmth or feeling. "Bertonia's sudden reassignment would have been problematic had we not prepared for such an occasion."

The murmuring from the remaining scientists grew louder, morphing into a rhythmic, guttural chanting, the words indistinct but the intent terrifyingly clear.

"And you're right," Dr. Neurton continued, her voice rising above the eerie chorus, a note of manic pride entering her tone, "the cause of our work here has upset some forces... forces far beyond human comprehension... but that is simply the course of evolution! Progress requires sacrifice."

With a swift, almost imperceptible motion, Dr. Neurton produced a silver-white athame from a hidden sheath on her exoskeleton. The surface of the blade was engraved with glowing, pulsing orange symbols that seemed to drink the light. In a horrifyingly fluid, ritualistic movement, she plunged the blade into Scientist #2's neck and drew it across. The chanting from the other scientists intensified, reaching a feverish, ecstatic crescendo as Scientist #2 gurgled, a fountain of blood blossoming from the wound, his life ebbing away in a crimson torrent onto the sterile silver table.

"And you will feel the next wave of it shortly..." Dr. Neurton murmured, her eyes gleaming with a terrifying, unnatural light. She ran her hand through the flowing blood, gathering the warm

fluid in her palm. Then, with a slow, devilish smile that showed too many teeth, she brought her hand to her lips and drank deeply.

Scientist #2's body went instantly limp, his life extinguished. The ritualistic chanting ceased as abruptly as it began, leaving an echoing, terrifying silence in its wake.

"The Hell Wave will arrive soon, a wave of pure psychic energy," Dr. Neurton announced, her voice resonating with a chilling authority that demanded compliance. "Shall we ready the door to this new paradise?"

Sublevel One - Armory

Moments later, William Thompson found himself deep in the sub-level armory, a brightly lit space filled with the gleaming potential of advanced weaponry. He was standing ready, receiving his final equipment fitting. Inside, a seasoned technician, similarly clad in heavy, older-model cybernetic armor, was meticulously fitting William with the base's standard-issue suit. The low, resonant metallic hum of countless integrated servos and hydraulics filled the air.

"This armor is standard issue for all Sol Union Corp militia," the Armory Tech rumbled, his voice slightly distorted by his internal comms. "But don't get too excited; this group doesn't take kindly to losing assets, so this gear is more for protecting their investment than you. Keep it in one piece."

William smirked slightly as he secured the helmet. Instantly, a complex digital display—a Heads-Up Display (HUD)—illuminated his visor, a kaleidoscope of status indicators, weapons data, and mapping overlays flickering to life.

"The helmet provides full oxygen support for surface excursions and toxic atmosphere containment," the Tech continued, his voice now clearer through William's internal comms. "Those displays will assist you daily: weapons status, advanced mapping, inventory management, company announcements—the usual military and corporate jargon. Any initial questions?"

William took a moment, absorbing the massive flood of new information and the weight of the suit. "These I.F. Storage compartments I keep hearing about—how do I avoid losing a finger when the system activates?"

The Armory Tech chuckled, picking up a standard-issue plasma rifle—sleek, black, and dangerously futuristic. He expertly checked the safety before offering it to William. "It's much easier than you think, Thompson. The system uses a localized, low-power phase-shift field. Think of it like this: Hold this rifle and imagine it's a beautiful woman you're snapping a mental picture of. A clear, specific thought."

William rolled his eyes good-naturedly, a small, genuine smile playing on his lips at the subtle joke. He took the rifle, holding it up for a moment. A subtle *click* echoed in his helmet as the system recognized the weapon. "Now what?"

"Now, just hold the rifle to your side and let the system work its magic. Clear thought, clear action."

William lowered the rifle to his side. His hand jerked back in surprise as the I.F. (Internal Field) Storage Pack activated. There was a low *thrum*, and the rifle seemed to instantly shrink and be absorbed into a dimensional fold with an almost imperceptible, shimmering distortion of the air. It was simply *gone*.

"See, just like that! No loss of limb, only a brief, harmless phase-shift!" the Armory Tech exclaimed, a note of proprietary pride in his voice. "Now just imagine that rifle again, clearly and precisely, to pull it out."

William followed the instruction. Just as quickly and silently, the rifle materialized back in his hand. "Now that's genuinely awesome."

"Isn't it? One of the few genuine perks of a Sol Union Corp paycheck is access to their new toys! Now, in case you find yourself in a shithole situation—which, let's be honest, you will—there are magnetic mounting spots on the front and back of your armor to secure weapons externally." The technician produced a futuristic plasma pistol and attached it with a sharp *clack* to a mounting point just above William's right leg.

"The science boys really thought of everything, didn't they? They're practically spoiling us." William mused, already feeling more confident with the gear.

"Trust me, it blew my mind to see them actually listen to what us leathernecks had to say for a change..." The Tech paused, his voice turning seri-

ous. "Before I send you skipping off into the maintenance shafts, any other questions, Thompson?"

"Just one," William said, looking at the glowing muzzle of his new rifle. "What's with the complete focus on plasma rounds and energy weapons? No ballistics?"

The armory tech chuckled, a dry, rasping sound. "Like I said, the brainiacs at weapons labs actually listen to what we need. The basic idea for plasma weapons is to solve situations where someone might run out of bullets—or, more accurately, when Sol Union doesn't want to fund costly resupply missions. If you're stuck on an alien planet or deep in the sub-levels, getting more supplies might take a while. So why not have a gun that can recharge itself and its ammunition through a standard power supply? It's cost-effective for them, and life-saving for you."

The armory technician walked over to a nearby computer screen, scanning the monitor for William's clearance and mission parameters. "You're heading to the old communications building, looking for Raymond? Good luck with that."

He shook his head slowly, a gesture of profound resignation.

"So I assume the rumors about the psychic breaks and mass hysteria are true?" William asked, a hint of unease finally entering his voice.

The armor tech looked towards William, his expression instantly serious, his eyes meeting the soldier's in a shared understanding. "And you're diving headfirst into the mudpits to investigate... so again... *good luck*."

Sublevel One - **Thompson's Path**

Dr. Taylor Hall watched the sprawling base map from his tablet, the blue dot representing William Thompson finally flickering to life on the digital schematic. "About time you got online, Thompson," he muttered to himself, just as a stark red warning sign flashed across the screen's periphery: ***"Unusual power fluctuations detected near the teleportation bays by Delta Labs."***

"What the hell?" Hall jammed a tiny earbud in, the wire disappearing behind his ear, and radioed Thompson through the command center's secure network.

Deep in Sublevel One, William navigated the labyrinthine, poorly lit corridors, his plasma rifle held loosely but ready at his hip. Static crackled incessantly in his helmet, a constant, irritating companion as he searched for the communication facility Dr. Raymond was supposedly heading for. "Thompson, this is Taylor Hall, do you read me?" Hall's voice, tinny and slightly distorted through the comms, cut through the white noise.

William paused at a junction, fumbling briefly for the correct verbal command to respond. "Yeah, I read. This is William Thompson. You gonna whisper sweet nothings in my ear or do you have something for me, Doctor?"

"Potentially," Hall replied, a slight hesitation in his voice that William immediately noted. "There is a major power fluctuation—a serious one—being reported near your current location, around the old Delta Labs section. Keep an eye out."

As if on cue, the flickering overhead lights around William intensified their erratic dance, casting eerie, shifting shadows that startled the few uneasy Sol Union Corp scientists hurrying about their duties. "What's causing it? Is it an overload?"

William asked, his voice betraying a hint of unease as he reached an elevator, its brushed metal doors gleaming under the unstable lighting.

"I don't know," Hall admitted, frustration audible in his voice. "For some reason, I can't get any deeper system access. It's like a high-level firewall has just been dropped on that section of the network."

"Out of curiosity," William continued, stepping into the elevator car and pressing the button for Sublevel Seven, the deepest part of his immediate descent, "is there a map somewhere in this damn helmet so I know where I'm going, or am I going in blind?"

A brief beat of silence followed. "I'm in the elevator now, heading to sublevel..." William trailed off, his eyes widening in a sudden, visceral moment of terror. He thought he saw something to his left—two faint, glowing red eyes staring back at him from the dark, recessed corner of the elevator car, barely illuminated by the flashing indicators. He squinted, clenching his jaw, and looked again, forcing himself to analyze the shape. Only two

faint, steady red indicator lights blinked back from a wall panel. He took a slow, heavy breath.

"Thompson? You still there?" Hall's voice was edged with professional concern.

"Yes, I'm still here," William replied, forcing his voice to sound nonchalant, dismissing the hallucination as stress. "I just thought I saw something in the corner. Bad lighting."

"That's what I was afraid of..." Hall's transmission began to break up violently, replaced by a surge of harsh, deafening static.

"Hall? Hall!" William yelled, frustration and a fresh wave of unease lacing his tone, his fists clenching as the elevator doors groaned open with a loud, mechanical hiss.

He had arrived at ***Sublevel Seven***.

The lights here were blessedly steady, a welcome relief from the flickering chaos above. As William stepped out, a frazzled Sol Union Corp scientist, hurrying past with a stack of clipboards, jumped back with a yelp at the sudden sight of William's armored bulk and held rifle. "Jesus Christ! Don't you gunners know by now how on edge we are down here! What's the protocol for scaring non-

combat staff!?" the scientist yelled, clutching his chest dramatically.

William instinctively lowered his rifle to a non-threatening position. "Apologies, sir, that wasn't my intent. I was sent to look for Dr. Raymond. Have you seen him through this section?"

The scientist visibly relaxed, running a hand through his thinning hair. "Raymond? Yeah, I saw him about an hour ago. He looked completely unhinged. It definitely looked like the stress of this place was finally getting to him."

"Did he look like he was going to hurt himself or others? Did he say anything specific, anything coherent?"

"Actually, that was the weirdest part. He wasn't just raving. He kept saying something about 'she needs to be stopped,' and repeating 'Deimos.' A couple of us tried to talk to him, but he was so hell-bent on whatever he was doing that he didn't seem to notice us at all! He was like a ghost."

William tried to press for more details—who was 'she,' what was 'Deimos'—but a sudden, sharp metallic crash and a chorus of terrified screams from the direction of the infirmary interrupted

him. Rifle instantly raised and ready, William charged towards the sounds.

He burst through the infirmary doors, the sight of a chaotic scene immediately unfolding before him. Five medical staff—two nurses, two doctors, and one orderly—struggled with frantic futility to restrain a violently thrashing male patient. "Can we get him sedated, people! He's going to hurt someone!" a nurse yelled, her voice strained to the breaking point.

"He's already got enough tranquilizers in him to put down an elephant—they aren't working!" another cried out in disbelief.

William rushed to assist, his massive, armored form a sudden, decisive presence. The aggressive patient broke free from the collapsing restraint, his eyes wide and bloodshot, and lunged wildly at William. Without hesitation, William brought the butt of his plasma rifle around in a swift, brutal strike to the man's temple, sending the patient sprawling, instantly unconscious.

The staff, momentarily stunned by William's sudden, professional aggression, took a collective, shaky breath. One of the nurses quickly moved

to a series of secured cabinets, returning with a set of heavy, military-grade titanium restraints. "Finally..." she murmured, her hands shaking slightly as she secured the unconscious patient's wrists and ankles to the medical bed with finality. As she worked, William noticed disturbing patches of brown, thick, leathery, and unnaturally-scaled skin beginning to form on the patient's neck and hands.

"What exactly happened to him?" William asked, his voice low and concerned.

Nurse #1 looked up, still trying to calm her racing heart. "Possible severe radiation exposure and mutagenic response, at least that's why his skin looks the way it does. We've seen similar cases from the Delta Labs area. But the behavior... the sheer, unbridled violence... that was sudden, and it's getting worse." She paused, then, her eyes fixing on William's armored form. "Are you Corporal Thompson? The one Kelso mentioned?"

William mounted his rifle to the magnetic clip on the back of his armor with a decisive *thunk*. "I guess you already know why I'm down here, then."

"Yes, Sergeant Kelso sent out a notice about you looking for Dr. Raymond due to concerns for his 'mental state'..."

"That's about it. You have something to tell me about that beyond the official story?"

Nurse #1's expression grew serious, a genuine look of fear and warning replacing her professional weariness. "I have reason to believe Raymond isn't simply having a psychotic episode. From what little we saw, he was too focused, too coherent in his panic. Something *terrified* him, bad. It was a panic attack rooted in reality, not madness."

"Do you know how I find him? My equipment doesn't seem to function down here. The map is blank, and Hall can't get through."

"It's not your gear, Corporal," Nurse #2 interjected, exchanging a tense, knowing glance with Nurse #1. "It's the level. The old comms facility is buried under layers of structural shielding and interference. Sol Union built it to be completely cut off."

Nurse #1 looked back at William, pointing towards a barely visible, bolted-down access panel in the wall. "If Raymond is heading to the old comm

facility, you'll have to take the maintenance paths through the next two sublevels to get to it. You're going to be going through the dark. Be careful what you touch."

William grabbed his plasma rifle, took a deep, resolving breath, and nodded. "Thank you for the warning. Hopefully, I won't have to bring you another belligerent patient." He gave a curt, professional nod, turned, and ran out of the infirmary, heading for the barely-marked stairwell that led into the unseen, shielded depths of the maintenance tunnels. His mission had just gotten a lot darker.

4

And Flames

Frustration, a bitter, metallic tang that tasted like old copper, gnawed relentlessly at Dr. Taylor Hall. The relentless, infuriating technical glitches had multiplied exponentially with each passing second, a malicious digital assault that systematically severed his already strained communication with Sergeant William Thompson. He could almost physically feel the vital connection fraying, an invisible, crucial lifeline being slowly and deliberately choked off by an unseen hand. His fingers, usually so steady, so surgeon-precise in their movements, drummed an anxious, accelerating, almost frantic rhythm on the smooth, cold surface of his personal tablet. Each sharp, rapid tap echoed the frantic, rising beat of his own heart, a

mounting, suffocating panic he fought with every fiber of his professional reserve to ruthlessly suppress. Just as the visceral, almost overpowering urge to hurl the useless, malfunctioning device across the room in a fit of pure, unadulterated pique and professional rage became an almost unbearable physical ache, a new message popped up on the screen. Its sudden, stark appearance, a shocking anomaly in the cascade of red error messages, instantly arrested his attention and froze his hand mid-air.

The sender's identity was initially obscured, a digital ghost shrouded in a temporary mask of mystery and encryption, a veil that was swiftly and deliberately unveiled to reveal: **Samael Hendricks**. The name itself hit Taylor like a physical blow, a sudden, blinding flash of pain, twisting something deep, cold, and long-dormant within his gut. It was a name he hadn't heard—or consciously dared to utter—in years, a name that belonged inextricably to a past life, a profoundly dark and unforgiving chapter he had spent a decade meticulously trying to bury under layers of sterile Martian dust, mountains of professional achievement, and an unwa-

vering commitment to his new life. The subject line, stark, simple, yet loaded with the unbearable, crushing weight of unspoken history, read with an unnerving casualness: **"Hello, Old Friend."**

A raw, violent surge of electrical current seemed to jolt through Taylor's entire body, forcing a sharp, involuntary gasp from his lips. The seemingly innocuous, three-word phrase struck him with the blunt, brutal force of a physical impact, instantly shattering his focus on the unfolding crisis in the comms array. He rose abruptly from his workstation, the ceaseless, bustling hum of the command center—the urgent, clipped voices, the rhythmic clatter of keyboards, the insistent, flashing lights of the consoles—suddenly fading into a distant, muted, underwater murmur, as if a thick, soundproof wall had instantly dropped around him, isolating him completely. Tablet clutched so tightly in his hand his knuckles were bone-white points against his skin, he sought refuge, a quiet, forgotten corner where he could read the message in absolute, inviolable privacy, away from the prying eyes of his subordinates and the deafening cacophony of urgent, professional voices. He found

a secluded alcove near a rarely used emergency exit, its cold, metallic surface a stark, chilling contrast to the growing, burning warmth of dread, recognition, and a familiar, profound fear in his stomach.

The message unfolded, each word a slow, deliberate, agonizing twist of a freshly sharpened knife:

Hello, Dr. Hall, it certainly has been a while. I have just been informed that our time may be critically limited. It seems that our worst fears, the ones we swore on everything we had to prevent from ever materializing, are about to become a devastating, inescapable truth...

Taylor froze completely, the blood rapidly draining from his face, leaving his skin pallid, clammy, and paper-thin. The words resonated with a terrifying, chilling familiarity, an exact, perfect echo of nightmares he thought he had long since vanquished with cold, hard logic, clinical research, and the irreversible passage of time. He knew, instinctively and with a certainty that completely transcended mere logic, the horrific, earth-shattering subject Samael was referring to. His breath hitched, a ragged, painful gasp caught deep in his throat. His chest tightened painfully, a psy-

chological vise clamping down on his lungs, as he fought a desperate, losing battle to regain control, to force life-giving air into his burning chest, to focus his racing, chaotic thoughts into a single, cohesive line. With hands that trembled visibly, hands that completely betrayed the professional, unshakeable calm he usually exuded, he raised the tablet to reply. The screen flickered wildly, an accurate, unsettling reflection of the tremor in his own grip.

Why did you ever involve me in this hell? he typed, the accusation thick and suffocating in the air around him, a silent, internal scream of betrayal, profound pain, and a lifetime of regret. The words practically vibrated with the depth of his resentment, a decade of agonizing, self-recrimination distilled into a single, damning question aimed squarely at the ghost of his past.

Another message appeared almost instantly, a reply that seemed to mock the very notion of time, distance, and encryption, again from the sender marked as Samael Hendricks. The speed of the response was unnerving, almost supernatural, as if Samael had been actively waiting, anticipating his

exact question before Taylor had even finished typing the last word.

You are among the few I trusted implicitly, your legacy and your research helped define all that is contained here. And now, that same legacy is our only, desperate hope...

Under his breath, a low, guttural, animalistic growl escaped Taylor's lips, a sound born of pure, concentrated, distilled rage and bitter understanding. "You absolute son of a bitch..." The words were laced with venom, a testament to the profound, incandescent anger that now coursed through his veins, forcibly displacing the ice-cold fear and the paralyzing confusion. He gripped the tablet tighter, his knuckles white points of stressed bone, the sudden, overwhelming urge to crush the delicate device in his hand almost irresistible. The unbearable weight of his past, of the catastrophic, world-altering choices he had made in the shadow of a different life, suddenly felt immense, crushing him under its oppressive, inescapable presence.The Mechanical Labyrinth

While Dr. Hall was still processing the impossible, grappling with the sudden, terrifying resur-

gence of a buried, monstrous past, Sergeant William Thompson was already deep within the tight, metallic guts of the maintenance halls. The air in these forgotten, rarely-used corridors was thick and heavy, saturated with the faint, almost sweet metallic scent of ozone and the stale, poorly re-circulated air that barely stirred, a suffocating, almost claustrophobic contrast to the open, vast Martian atmosphere. His eyes, keen and focused with the intensity of a man who has seen too much, ceaselessly scanned the smudged, cryptic signs and stenciled warnings that adorned the grimy, exposed walls, each one a small riddle to be solved, a crucial breadcrumb trail in a dizzying maze of identical hallways. He moved with a quiet, efficient urgency, the soft, controlled echo of his footsteps barely registering in the enclosed space, searching desperately for the elusive path, the hidden artery that would lead him directly to the comms facility, the only viable, desperate hope of re-establishing contact with Hall and beginning to understand the terrifying, unfolding catastrophe.

"'Come to Mars,'" he muttered, a sarcastic, weary rasp in his voice, the words tasting like dry,

bitter ash in his mouth. "'We'll get together, have a few laughs, it'll be fun...'" The biting irony was almost a physical thing, a phantom limb that ached with the memory of broken promises, of naive, civilian dreams that had withered and died under the unforgiving, blood-red Martian sun. He vividly remembered the glossy recruitment videos, bright and saccharine, promising a new frontier, a fresh, clean start, a chance to be a pioneer. All corporate lies, of course. Just another desolate, inhospitable, red rock to eventually bleed on.

A burst of sharp, violent static from his helmet radio, a sudden, unwelcome intrusion into the oppressive silence, then Sergeant Kelso's gruff, unmistakable voice cut harshly through the air. "Thompson, do you read me? I heard about your... *actions* in the infirmary earlier..."

"Yes, Sergeant," William replied, a slight, almost imperceptible edge to his tone, a subtle defiance and cynical resignation that only someone who had spent too long in the close company of hard, cynical men could possibly detect. "Someone was giving the nurses an unnecessarily hard time, and I knocked him soundly asleep. Standard procedure,

sir." He didn't elaborate, didn't feel the need to justify the brutal expediency of his actions. Kelso knew. Everyone knew the unwritten rule: when base order broke down, when the brittle veneer of civilization finally cracked, someone had to pick up the pieces, even if it meant getting a little messy, a little violent, a little morally grey.

"The nurses send their thanks, Thompson. A rare commodity in this hole," Kelso said, a hint of genuine amusement, almost a chuckle, briefly coloring his voice. It was a rare, surprising sound from the hardened veteran, a small testament to the fact that even in this corporate hellhole, small acts of decisive decency and brutal protection resonated. "Have you found Raymond yet?"

"No sir, I'm moving through the main maintenance tunnels in sublevel nine to get to the comms facility. I'm almost there." The tunnels were a claustrophobic, bewildering labyrinth of rusted, dripping pipes and exposed, sparking wires, smelling intensely of dust, stale, fetid air, and heavy machine oil, a stark, functional contrast to the clean, impersonal, sterile corridors of the main

base. He preferred the tunnels. Less pretense. More honest.

"Good to hear you follow *someone's* orders for a change. Double-time it, Thompson! We don't have all day for your scenic route!" Kelso's voice instantly hardened, the brief flash of amusement gone, replaced by an urgent, non-negotiable authority that brooked no argument. "Dr. Hall has identified some potential **anomalies**, and we'll need all hands on this immediately!" *Anomalies*. The word hung in the recycled air, heavy and thick with unspoken dread, a chilling euphemism for the unknown and the dangerous. On Mars, in a corporate research facility miles from any help, anomalies rarely, if ever, meant anything remotely good or manageable.

"Yes sir." The transmission abruptly cut out, leaving William alone again with the relentless, monotonous hum of the ventilation system, a mechanical, unfeeling heartbeat in the cold, unfeeling belly of the facility. He sighed, the sound escaping his lips in a weary, visible puff of air. "So much for an easy first day on the job..." He ran a calloused hand over his tired eyes, the red, fine dust of Mars

ingrained in his skin, a permanent, unwelcome reminder of his new, terrifying reality.The Scientist's Descent

A loud, sudden hiss from behind him made him physically jump, his combat-honed reflexes kicking in instantly, his heart thudding against his ribs like a trapped, frantic bird. He instantly collected himself, straining to hear any further sound over the constant, droning roar of the massive air-filtration fans. A subtle voice, barely a whisper at first, echoed eerily through the cramped, metallic hall, growing clearer and more frantic as he moved cautiously towards its source. It was Dr. Raymond. The sound was fragmented, desperate, almost animalistic in its profound terror.

"Why! Why! Why!" The shouts were frantic, raw with terror, disbelief, and incomprehension, each syllable ripped from a throat that had seemingly seen too much, understood too little of a sudden, brutal, shattering truth.

"Dr. Raymond?" William yelled back, his voice cutting through the rising panic and the mechanical drone, a desperate attempt to anchor himself, and perhaps Raymond, in reality. "Are you okay,

sir?" He rushed towards the sound, his heavy, armored boots clanging loudly on the metallic grates of the floor, hearing the impossible—someone scrambling up a metallic stairwell at an inhumane, terrifying speed, a sound that defied logic, defying the known limitations of the human body.

"Dr. Raymond! Dr. Raymond!" His pleas were brutally swallowed by the echoing, indifferent confines of the tunnels.

Raymond's frantic, desperate rants abruptly faded behind a metallic slam, a jarring finality that reverberated through the entire length of the tunnel. William followed, taking the stairs two at a time, his leg muscles screaming in immediate protest, emerging breathless and hyper-alert into the cold, silent, airless space of the decommissioned comms facility. The air in here was even colder than the tunnels, thick and heavy with the silence of profound, dusty abandonment. Dust motes danced lazily in the sparse, weak beams of light filtering through grimy, high-up ventilation vents.

Dr. Raymond was there, hunched over a series of ancient, dust-covered computer terminals, his

fingers flying across the keyboards with a manic, terrifying intensity, a frantic, desperate energy radiating from him like a palpable, feverish heat. He was clearly profoundly disturbed, a man on the very edge, teetering precariously on the precipice of something terrifying and final. His hair was disheveled, sweat plastered to his forehead and running down his temples, and his eyes, wide and bloodshot, darted wildly around the room as if pursued by unseen, malevolent demons.

William burst in, the suddenness of his entry causing Raymond to flinch violently, but only for a fraction of a second before returning to his work. William tried desperately to comprehend the scene—the absolute chaos of the room, the desperate, almost deranged focus of the renowned scientist.

"I need to get this out!" Raymond shrieked, his voice laced with pure desperation, cracking with the unbearable strain of his efforts. "Petersen better answer! Maybe Cloud can tell them! Someone needs to stop her! Goddammit Hendricks, why did you trust that woman?! I told you something was not right about her! We should have..." His words

dissolved into a choked, ragged sob, his fingers still flying across the keys, as if the answers to his frantic, terrifying questions lay buried deep within the obsolete, humming machines.

“Dr. Raymond,” William interrupted, his voice firm and steady but laced with genuine, deep concern, a deliberate lifeline thrown into a raging, chaotic sea. “Are you okay? We need to talk.”

Raymond recoiled violently from William, a guttural, wounded scream escaping him. He scrambled back to the computers, gasping for breath, his eyes frantically searching the floor until they landed on a prosthetic finger he'd dropped earlier. He quickly, mechanically, and sickeningly reattached it to his hand.

"Whoever you are," Raymond rasped, his eyes wild and unfocused, "I have no time for this. Just let whoever sent you know that I am okay. I cannot leave! This has to get out!"

William, thoroughly confused and deeply unsettled, tried again, "Sir, are you okay? What’s going on here? We have a complete comms blackout in the command center and Hall is panicking."

"Just, please!" Raymond screamed, a desperate, raw plea in his voice. "Don't distract me! Time is running out!"

The archaic computers hummed loudly, then sputtered, before finally groaning audibly to life. Raymond's fingers flew across the keyboard, a blur of motion as he typed complex, forgotten codes, attempting to access a remote communication relay. The system lagged severely, a frustrating, life-threatening slowness that made Raymond curse loudly, violently, and eloquently under his breath.

"Sir," William tried again, his voice softer, more pleading, "I just started today and I have absolutely no clue what has been happening in this base. What is bothering you? What are the anomalies?"

Raymond let out a sudden, strange, nervous laugh, bordering on full-blown hysteria. "There's no way for you to possibly understand, Thompson. How could you? I just wanted to build... I just wanted to make life better for so many people. I put so much of my life here... all for *her* to ruin it!"

A sudden, violent tremor shook the base, rattling its very foundations, the terrifying sound of grinding metal echoing everywhere. William

looked around, bewildered, grabbing a rusty support post for balance. Raymond froze instantly, pure, unadulterated terror etched on his contorted face.

"Must be a localized quake..." William mumbled, trying desperately to rationalize the impossible.

"That's not a quake!" Raymond cried, his voice high-pitched and hysterical, the sound of a man who has lost all hope. "That's *it*!"

The computer screen flickered violently, displaying a security feed of the base exterior, a grainy, distorted image. A message prompt appeared on a secondary terminal, and Raymond's fingers flew across the keyboard with renewed, frantic speed, typing a desperate, last-ditch plea.

"To all Sol Union Corp Personnel," he typed, his voice a strained whisper, "I am writing you to request immediate military assistance to the Sol Union Corp Mars facility... A research station has been compromised, and a rogue scientist by the name of **Alicia Neurton** is about to orchestrate an invasion of the very thing we created... Please... send help or use the classified Armored Terran Re-

sistance project **Horde Annihilation Gun-1210993** to destroy everything and everyone, if you have to..."

Another tremor, stronger and more sickeningly violent this time, shook the base, making the very walls buckle. William struggled desperately to keep his balance while Dr. Raymond propped himself rigidly against the computer terminal, his body trembling uncontrollably, his face white with terror. Raymond then retrieved a futuristic, palm-sized hard drive from an inner coat pocket and, with a sudden, forceful, unexpected motion, shoved it into a specialized, proprietary port on William's armored suit—a port designed specifically for experimental software and diagnostic upgrades.

"What the hell did you put into me?" William demanded, his body tensing, a prickle of approaching, intense danger crawling up his spine, his instincts screaming a warning.

Raymond sighed, a ragged, despairing sound of final surrender. "You want to know what's happening, Sergeant?" William nodded sharply, eyes locked on the frantic scientist. "The devil? He's

real, Thompson. I know. I built his damn cage! And now *she* has opened it. She is letting the *Horde* loose."

A third, bone-rattling tremor rocked the base with catastrophic force, nearly knocking both William and Raymond completely off their feet. The very foundations of the facility groaned and shrieked under the immense, crushing strain, sounding like a dying, metallic beast. William's radio screeched violently to life, then a monstrous, deep, unbelievably guttural laughter, chilling and profoundly malevolent, filled the comms facility, seeming to emanate from the very walls and the ground itself. Emergency protocols, automatically triggered by the escalating chaos, brought up security feeds on the main computer terminal. The screens flickered wildly to life, displaying scenes of absolute, graphic carnage in various, distant parts of the base. Screams of raw terror, frantic, dying shouts, and the sharp, distinctive crackle of energy gunfire echoed chillingly throughout the entire facility, creeping through the reinforced walls and into the comms center, a horrifying, chilling symphony of despair and death.

"We're too late!" Raymond cried, his voice a raw, desperate whisper laced with unadulterated, blinding panic. His bloodshot eyes darted wildly across the screens, his face pale and slack with shock and horror.

William, transfixed with a growing horror, stared numbly at the horrific, unfolding scenes of carnage. The incessant screaming, amplified and distorted by the comms system, triggered a profound and debilitating wave of PTSD from his combat history on distant, forgotten campaigns. His breathing became ragged and shallow, his body began to shake uncontrollably, a tremor that originated deep within his core, as his pulse skyrocketed, thrumming a frantic, painful beat against his temples.

"We need to get out of here!" Raymond shouted, his voice now a desperate, shrill plea, cutting violently through William's spiraling terror. He grabbed William's armored arm, his grip surprisingly strong and frantic, pulling him towards the exit.

Just then, a mysterious, ethereal red mist began, slowly but inexorably, to fill the room, swirling

with an ominous, faint glow near William and Dr. Raymond, like a sickly, crimson tide. It pulsed with a faint, malevolent energy, a chilling warmth. William, his combat instincts screaming a warning, noticed it instantly and recoiled, jumping violently away from its insidious, encroaching tendrils. Dr. Raymond, however, in his desperate, blind attempt to flee the rapidly encroaching vapor, inadvertently inhaled a deep lungful of the crimson, foul mist.

"Doc!" William yelled, his voice laced with gut-wrenching worry and a dawning, absolute horror. "Doc, cover your face!"

It was tragically too late. Dr. Raymond began to convulse violently, his body shaking uncontrollably, his limbs flailing like a marionette caught in an unseen, malevolent current. His skin, once a healthy, flushed color, drained instantly of all pigment, becoming a sickly, cadaverous grey as if all his body mass simply melted away in a matter of horrifying seconds. He retched violently, releasing all bodily fluids and a sickening gush of thick, dark blood onto the metal floor. William watched in paralyzed disbelief, utterly immobilized by the

sight, as Dr. Raymond's grotesque, inhuman transformation from a brilliant human scientist to a shambling, grotesque zombie unfolded before his very eyes. The former human, now a twisted, monstrous parody of his former self, lunged at William with an animalistic, supernatural might, a guttural, unearthly growl rumbling in its chest, forcing William to instinctively open fire. The zombified Dr. Raymond succumbed quickly to William's sustained plasma shots, disintegrating instantly into a putrid, sickening cloud of dust and vapor, the high-pitched, ozone-smelling ringing sound of the weapon echoing eerily through the now silent, smoke-filled room.

Realizing the terrifying and immediate intensity of the situation, the sheer, unimaginable, cosmic horror that had descended upon them, William bolted for the exit, his heart hammering against his ribs with a desperate urgency.

"Son of a bitch, son of a bitch, son of a bitch!" he gasped, the words tumbling out in ragged, desperate gasps as he sprinted towards the only way out, fighting the rising panic.

He yanked frantically at the massive, heavy door, but it wouldn't budge, sealed shut by a sudden, catastrophic power failure or a failing, corrupted system. He swiped his keycard repeatedly, his hand shaking, but nothing happened. In a burst of pure, unadulterated frustration and adrenaline-fueled desperation, he slammed his armored fist into the thick glass panel next to the lock, managing to shatter it with a resounding, violent crash. With a primal roar of fear and brute strength born of profound, mortal terror, he forced the door open, splintering the heavy metal frame, and scrambled blindly towards the maintenance stairs that had led him to this living nightmare.The Command Center Falls

Simultaneously, in the command center, Dr. Hall paced the length of the room with a frantic, agitated energy, the oppressive, growing silence of the room a stark contrast to the frantic, pounding dread in his chest. Each tick of the clock on the illuminated console seemed to amplify his growing, suffocating dread. "Thompson! Thompson! Do you read?!" His voice, usually steady, controlled, and authoritative, cracked with each unanswered

call, each silence amplifying his dread and relentlessly pushing him closer to the brink of complete, professional panic. He gripped the sharp edge of a data terminal, his knuckles white and bloodless, the flickering indicators on the screen offering no solace, only a relentless, agonizing display of an unresponsive signal.

A technician, the same quiet, competent woman who had been with him earlier, Anya Sharma, a small anchor of sanity, approached cautiously. Her hand settled gently on his shoulder, a small, comforting gesture that momentarily pierced through his frantic thoughts. “Dr. Hall, is everything okay? Has the comms array come back online?” Her concern, though softly spoken, was a small, fragile anchor in the rising tide of his mounting anxiety, a brief, fragile respite from the relentless, internal assault of his fears.

He took a deep, shuddering breath, trying desperately to compose himself, to force a semblance of control onto his rapidly unraveling composure. "Yes, I’m sure everything is alright... just a cascading system failure in the tunnels. Thank you, Anya." The lie tasted like dry ash in his mouth,

acrid and bitter, a futile attempt to reassure both her and himself. His gaze darted around the command center, a flurry of worried faces and hushed, nervous whispers confirming his absolute worst suspicions.

Then, the base shuddered again, a low, grinding, violent tremor that was unmistakably not a normal, geological marsquake. It was deeper, more violent, a tremor that seemed to come from the very core of the planet itself, a guttural groan from the depths of Mars' ancient rock. Eyes across the room widened in collective, silent horror, a choked gasp rippling through the tense, charged air, the low, electronic hum of the machinery momentarily drowned out by the rising, palpable fear.

"Please tell me that you have had issues with marsquakes before?" He demanded, his gaze fixed intensely on Anya, searching desperately for any sign of reassurance, any shred of normalcy that could possibly explain this terrifying, accelerating anomaly.

She shook her head, her face pale with pure fear, the blood completely drained from her cheeks. "No, Dr. Hall, there were a couple of minor

tremors from the old dig sites to the north, occasionally... but nothing, absolutely nothing like this!" Her voice was barely a whisper, a stark contrast to the growing, deafening roar of the shaking. The air crackled with an unseen, powerful energy, the metallic tang of fear thick on their tongues.

The tremor hit again, stronger this time, a violent lurch that threw some personnel off their feet, sending chairs scraping loudly across the floor and equipment clattering violently. The command center plunged into momentary, jarring darkness as the main computers flickered and died, their screens going utterly black, the vital data streams abruptly cut off. Alarms began to blare, a piercing, discordant symphony of warning that assaulted their ears, an almost physical manifestation of the unfolding disaster.

"We need to evacuate the facility immediately!" Hall shouted, his voice barely audible above the rising chaos and the blaring alarms, the crushing weight of the unfolding disaster pressing down on him. The automated emergency lights, a sickly, pulsing red, began to flash, painting the panicked,

terrified faces of the crew in a hellish, demonic glow.

A third, bone-rattling tremor slammed into them with overwhelming, seismic force, rattling bones and teeth, a shockwave that vibrated through the very core of their beings. Computers glitched wildly, screens erupting in static, displaying fractured images and garbled data before dying completely, permanently. Then, a sound that froze the very blood in their veins, a sound that defied all physics, all logic and scientific understanding: deep, monstrous laughter echoing through the very foundations of the base, a resonant, guttural, unholy sound that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere all at once.

"What the hell *was* that?!" Anya whispered, her eyes wide with unadulterated terror, her voice barely a breath, her hand unconsciously gripping Hall's arm with paralyzing strength.

Hall met her gaze, the intensity in his posture speaking volumes, a grim, world-ending realization dawning in his eyes. "Hell..." he uttered, the single, terrifying word loaded with a terrifying prophecy. "It's come for us. Samael wasn't lying."

Alarms began to blare anew, painting the room in a pulsating, urgent red glow, the urgent flashes reflecting in the wide, terrified eyes of the personnel. An automated voice, synthesized and unnervingly calm, cut through the cacophony, cold and precise. "This is a level five emergency. All personnel evacuate immediately to the nearest launch bay or emergency bunker! This is not a drill! All Sol Union Corp militia commence order 9-7-3 of evacuation protocol." The clinical detachment of the voice only intensified the cosmic horror of the situation.

Doorways burst open, and staff surged out, a panicked, desperate flood of bodies driven by primal fear, a desperate, every-man-for-himself scramble for survival. Hall was among the first, propelled by a desperate, overriding instinct, running for his life when the animalistic roars and the shattering glass reached him, sounds of utter, unhinged carnage erupting from the outer corridors, confirming their absolute worst fears. The screams began, distant at first, then closer, chilling them to the bone, the screams of the dead and the dying.

The invasion, driven by the unleashed 'Horde,' had commenced.

5

Bring Inferno

William's heavy boots slapped a jarring rhythm against the cold, metallic floor of the sub-level maintenance halls. The rhythmic *thud, thud, thud* was a futile attempt to impose order on the chaotic symphony of klaxons and alarms that shrieked around him. His rifle, the familiar weight of the Sol Union Corp issue plasma caster, was gripped so tightly his knuckles were stark white, straining against the confines of his armored gauntlet. Yet, even the deafening roar of the facility-wide emergency could not drown out the horrifying chorus filtering through his comms—a raw, terrified wave of human screams and gurgling agony that sent a deep, sickening shiver down his spine.

"Dr. Hall! Sergeant Kelso! Does anybody read me?" he yelled into the comms, his voice strained and cracking under the pressure. The microphone crackled with his desperation. "This is Corporal Thompson, what in the absolute fuck is going on down here?!"

Only a wall of static answered him, punctuated by the frantic, garbled shouts of overwhelmed Sol Union Corp militia. It was a cacophony of fear and military jargon reduced to meaningless noise, painting a chilling, visceral picture of a nightmare unfolding on the levels above. He pressed the comms button again, his voice now a desperate, almost pleading bellow. "Can anyone hear me? This is Corporal William Thompson!" Still, there was no coherent response, just the horrifying, gut-wrenching sounds of a battle well and truly lost, the final screams of his comrades echoing in the void.

Ahead, through the pulsating, sickly red glow of the emergency lights, two figures descended the maintenance stairs. They were unmistakable: helmeted, clad in the standard-issue Sol Union Corp combat armor, their rifles sweeping the dark area

with unnerving, machine-like precision, clearly searching for something—or someone. William's heart leaped in his chest. Hope, a dangerously fragile thing in this madness, surged through him, replacing the icy grip of dread. He waved frantically, the relief in his voice palpable and raw. "Hey! About time I found somebody! What the hell is going on up there?"

His words died in a ragged gasp in his throat. Without a single word, without the slightest hesitation, the two armored figures raised their rifles. Their movements were unnervingly synchronized, the practiced, lethal precision of trained soldiers, but lacking any human tremor. Muzzle flashes erupted—bright, spitting tongues of fire that tore through the darkened hall. A few searing plasma shots grazed William's left arm and shoulder, the heat instantly cauterizing the fabric of his uniform and kissing the armor beneath. He reacted on pure, desperate instinct, a lifetime of brutal training overriding all rational thought. He dodged violently, scrambling for cover behind a massive, insulated doorway, the sharp, acrid scent of burnt ozone from the plasma bolts filling the air. He re-

turned fire, his own plasma caster roaring deafeningly, the flashes briefly illuminating the advancing figures with a strobe-like effect. But they didn't flinch, didn't hesitate. They continued their relentless, unbroken charge, barely reacting to his shots, their unswerving, silent resolve unsettling him more than the gunfire itself.

William, a veteran of countless simulations and several real-world skirmishes, knew instantly he was outmatched in a straight firefight against such determined, unfeeling opponents. He waited, hunkered down, gripping his plasma pistol—a smaller, sidearm version of his rifle. Its low, familiar hum was a small, almost pathetic comfort against the rising tide of panic. As they drew closer, their forms resolving from shadows into clearer focus in the flickering light, he sprang from cover and unleashed a tight volley of searing plasma bolts. The superheated energy sizzled through the air, striking the first soldier with a grotesque splash of light, smoke, and dissolving armor. Before the second figure could react to the sudden, brutal assault, William rushed them, a surge of raw, animalistic adrenaline fueling his speed. He fired again, a

plasma bolt slamming into the second soldier's neck. A horrifying sizzle and crackle accompanied the impact, the sound of dissolving tissue and metal. Before the remaining figure could recover from the sudden attack, William closed the distance, his armored hand gripping the soldier's neck, twisting with a sickening, wet snap.

He took a moment, leaning heavily against the cold, unyielding metal wall, forcing himself to process the brutal, unexpected encounter. The scent of ozone, sharp and acrid, now mixed with a thick, metallic, and vaguely organic odor, was overpowering in the enclosed space. His arm throbbed, a dull, deep ache that he ruthlessly ignored, channeling the pain into focus. His gaze fell upon the two fallen, silent soldiers. Their bodies, now that the armor was compromised, seemed unsettlingly frail, weak, almost skeletal beneath their combat gear. They were disturbingly similar to the unsettling image of Dr. Raymond Thompson, the emaciated scientist he had been sent to find, now flashing through his mind. A profound, bone-deep sense of dread settled over him, cold and heavy.

"You had to do it... you had to do it..." he muttered to himself, the words a desperate, hollow mantra against the rising hysteria. The memory of his previous court-martial, the cold, judging eyes of his superiors, surged through him, pumping a fresh, frantic wave of adrenaline into his veins. This wasn't just about survival anymore; it was about something far more primal. This was about proving himself, about redemption in a world that had seemingly gone mad. He readied his rifle, checking the power cell, the familiar weight of it a grim comfort, and turned, making his way back towards the sublevel seven infirmary. He had to find answers, he had to find a way out, no matter the catastrophic cost.

Back on Earth, a chilling, almost subterranean current began to ripple through the carefully manicured façade of society. Whispers of an unfolding Martian crisis, initially dismissed by the establishment as the ramblings of fringe conspiracy theorists, now began to seep into the hidden corners of the world, igniting the fervent imaginations of those who dared to question the official narrative. In a dimly lit, cramped recording studio, miles

away from the polished, pristine newsrooms of the corporate media, "The Conspiracy Host" sat hunched behind a cheap desk. His face, etched with a mixture of profound apprehension and grim determination, was illuminated only by the harsh, single bulb of his desk lamp. He was a man preparing for a broadcast that, he knew with absolute certainty, could shatter the fragile, carefully constructed peace of the world—a peace built entirely on decades of manufactured lies. He drew a deep, shuddering breath, the immense weight of his revelations pressing down on him, a burden almost too heavy for one man to bear.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, his voice a low, gravelly rumble, a sound that promised not comfort, but uncomfortable, devastating truths. "Our worst, most unimaginable fears have been realized. Expect this broadcast to be taken down within minutes, and expect more people who know the truth to simply disappear."

Behind him, a graphic of the Sol system flickered to life on a large, cheap monitor, ominous and foreboding. The familiar planets, once vibrant symbols of human expansion, now seemed to glow

with a malevolent, unnatural reddish hue. From the inky blackness of the cosmic void, countless red eyes, like distant, hungry embers, glowed ominously, watching—waiting.

"We have received unconfirmed but highly credible reports," he continued, his voice gaining momentum, a growing, desperate urgency now evident, "that multiple Sol Union Corp facilities across the entire Sol system have been completely overrun by an unknown, hostile force. The vast majority of these reports mirror the horrific rumors circulating from the Sol Union Corp Mars facility—the very same rumors the corporate media has so vehemently tried to suppress and discredit." He paused, allowing his words to sink in, the unspoken implications hanging heavy, suffocating, in the air. "However, it appears these invaders have concentrated their most destructive efforts on the Sol Union Corp Mars and Pluto facilities."

The graphic behind him shifted, replaced by a time-lapse video sequence that would have sent a collective, terrified gasp through any audience. It was a horrifying spectacle: a decimated Pluto, its

once familiar, icy form now a shattered ruin, colossal chunks of its shattered surface still drifting lazily into the eternal cosmic void. And through the debris, a creature of pure nightmare tore through a shimmering, blood-red portal. Skeletal, unimaginably vast, and terrifyingly ethereal, it was a dragon—a *daemonster*, unlike anything humanity had ever conceived, an ancient, cosmic horror awakened from a timeless slumber. Its roars, silent to human ears in the vacuum of space, echoed through the vast, empty reaches, a deafening harbinger of untold destruction.

"Reports even suggest," the Host pressed on, a grim, despairing satisfaction in his tone, "a potential super-weapon system, dubbed the Horde Annihilation Gun-1210993, has been utilized by the Sol Union Corp in a desperate, last-ditch effort to fire upon Pluto itself! Amateur astronomers, working entirely independently, sent in a series of photographs, which our producers skillfully edited into the short video you now see on your screen. This sighting, the level five evacuation of the Sol Union Corp Mars facility... it feels wrong of me to say I told you so. But be prepared. We will do our

absolute best to update you as soon as we have any more verifiable information. May God have mercy on all our souls."

On Mars, within the bleak, blood-stained confines of Sublevel Seven, William arrived at a scene of utter, unspeakable devastation. The main hall, once a busy, hive-like center of Sol Union Corp activity, was now nothing more than a charnel house. Decimated bodies of security personnel and militia lay scattered everywhere, their forms mangled and twisted, their blood painting the walls alongside vicious, animalistic claw marks. The stench of death and profound fear hung heavy, almost palpable, in the stale air.

Suddenly, William's radio crackled sharply to life, a familiar voice whispering through the static, a small beacon in the overwhelming darkness. "Can anyone read me? This is Dr. Hall. Corporal Thompson, I see your location signal but have not been able to reach you until now..."

Relief, sharp and sudden, like a cold splash of water, coursed through William. "Dr. Hall? What in the absolute hell is going on in this base! I'm looking at a pile of bodies in sublevel seven, and

two guys in full Sol Union Corp armor just tried to gun me down!"

A long, profound sigh of relief echoed over the comms. "Thank God! Thompson, I was starting to think I was the only one left. Corporal, the base has been completely overrun! I managed to escape to a maintenance hatch just as those *things* started to kill everyone in the lab!"

William leaned his head against a shredded, metallic wall, trying to catch his breath, his mind struggling to process the enormity of Taylor's words. "What things are you talking about?! Seriously, please, break this down like you're talking to a new recruit! Why did two guys, supposedly on our side, just try to ambush and kill me?! Is the Sol Union Corp working on some kind of zombie bioweapon?"

"I don't know how much time we have to chat! Wait... what bioweapon?" Taylor's voice was tinged with genuine confusion, a stark contrast to William's mounting, frantic dread. William's deep-seated PTSD, a constant companion, flared instantly, his body trembling as if sensing the horrific truth of the "weapon."

"There was this red mist, Dr. Hall, that Raymond breathed in before he completely changed," William stammered, his voice ragged with a mixture of horror and exhaustion. He remembered Raymond's eyes, once so clear and full of life, now clouded with an alien, murderous malevolence. "It made him sick, then violent, like a rabid animal, only infinitely worse." He glanced involuntarily at the grotesque, twisted forms of the fallen soldiers he'd just fought, their limbs contorted at impossible, inhuman angles, their faces frozen in a rictus of feral aggression. "The guys who just attacked me... they looked exactly like Raymond after he turned. They got hit with it too, I'd bet my life on it." The metallic tang of pure, unadulterated fear was sharp on his tongue.

A chilling realization, cold and stark as a winter wind blowing through an open wound, dawned on Taylor. His breath hitched audibly in his throat. "Son of a bitch... they managed to perfect it..." The words were barely a whisper, yet they resonated with an unspoken, cosmic dread.

"'Perfect it?' What the hell are you talking about, Corporal?" William demanded, a raw

tremor in his voice, his military patience completely fraying under the immense, crushing pressure. The plasma burns on his arms, ruthlessly ignored during the frantic fight for survival, now began to sting with an agonizing, white-hot intensity as the adrenaline, his only shield, began to rapidly dissipate.

"Corporal, I don't have much time to explain... I think there are a couple of soldiers, or whatever used to be soldiers, trying to find me. They're closing in, I can hear them." Taylor's voice was urgent, each word laced with a desperate, frantic haste. "This is the truth, William, the absolute, unvarnished truth. These things attacking us, these abominations, are known officially as daemonsters by those who refuse to face the reality... but the truth is they are *demons*! I'm not talking in a metaphorical sense, William, I mean literal, hell-spawned entities. These things are where the metaphor comes from, where the legends originated!"

William violently shook his head, disbelief warring with a profound, bone-deep terror. His mind reeled, struggling to reconcile Taylor's insane

words with the grim, brutal reality he had just witnessed. "Did you get hit in the head, Hall! Are you out of your goddamn mind?!"

"I wish, trust me, William, I truly wish that were the case. It would be a damn sight easier." Taylor's voice hardened instantly, stripping away any hint of desperation, leaving only a grim, steely determination. "Believe me or not, I don't care right now. We don't have time to argue semantics, not now, not with what's coming for us. That red mist, you're right, it is a biological weapon, but it's something far, far more insidious than anything we've ever encountered. Think of it like a parasitic fungus, like *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, turning ants into mindless, aggressive zombies, but on a scale that threatens the total annihilation of all humanity. There's no antidote, William, no filtration system strong enough, no environmental suit that can keep it out. It's airborne, it's insidious, and it's everywhere."

William slammed his head against the cold, unyielding metal of the wall, a raw, guttural cry of despair escaping his lips. The full, devastating weight of the situation, the horrifying, cosmic implica-

tions of Taylor's words, finally sank in, crushing him under its immense burden. "Well then how the hell are we supposed to fight this?! How can we even *hope* to survive this?!"

A brief, agonizing silence stretched across the radio, punctuated only by the crisp, ominous crackle of static. It was a silence that spoke volumes, a chilling testament to the impossible, astronomical odds they faced.

"Dr. Samael Hendricks was one of the leading, if not *the* leading scientist behind the expeditions into... other realms," Taylor finally said, his voice softer, almost reverent, as if speaking of a ghost from a distant past. "He was considered a brilliant, if utterly eccentric, genius. There is technology he developed; cybernetic drone avatars, incredibly advanced weapons systems, even highly sophisticated, predictive AI. He always feared that our explorations into these other realms might risk a potential invasion, a cataclysmic breach... we all thought he was crazy! A paranoid doomsday prophet! Even more so when he allowed that psychotic bitch, Dr. Alicia Neurton, to take over through the classified operations station on

Deimos. I swear to God, William, that woman did *something* to start this, she unleashed this nightmare upon us!"

William, his frustration boiling over like acid, snapped. The searing pain from his plasma burns was a constant, unwelcome reminder of his acute vulnerability. "Hall! What's the point of this rambling history lesson?! Get to it!"

"The point, Corporal," Taylor countered, his voice instantly regaining its sharp, professional edge, "is that crazy son of a bitch, Hendricks, may have something hidden in his personal quarters, something he prepared for this exact, impossible scenario, that will help us, that might be our only chance left!"

"Alright, how can you be sure of that?" William asked, a flicker of desperate, fragile hope igniting within him, quickly followed by a healthy, rational dose of skepticism.

"The artifacts we recovered from those expeditions... the ancient texts, the strange, otherworldly carvings," Taylor explained, his voice hushed with the gravity of his revelation. "Let's just say that unless we completely got the translations wrong,

unless every scholar, every linguist, every cryptographer on the Sol Union payroll was mistaken... This is not the first invasion, William. This has happened before, eons ago, perhaps on other worlds, other dimensions. Hendricks was clearly far from stupid enough to ignore the possibility of a recurrence. He anticipated it, and he *prepared* for it."

William's eyes widened, a cold, creeping dread seeping into his very bones, chilling him to the core. The full scope of Taylor's words, the terrifying implication of a cyclical, cosmic horror, was almost too much to mentally bear. "What's the objective, then? What do we do now?"

"Sergeant Kelso has ordered all remaining Sol Union Corp militia to regroup at emergency bunkers scattered across the base," Taylor replied, his voice firm, professional. "The nearest one to your current position should take you directly past some of the weapons labs. You're going to need more firepower, William, a hell of a lot more, if you're going to face what's coming."

"What about you, Taylor? What's your next move?" William asked, a tight knot of apprehen-

sion forming in his stomach. He didn't want to be left alone in this nightmare, isolated and vulnerable.

Another agonizing pause stretched across the radio, longer this time, heavier with unspoken, dire concerns. Then, Taylor's voice, a hushed whisper, almost lost in the building static. "I'm going to visit Hendricks's office, his personal quarters. I need to see if I can find information on a rumored AI program he was developing... something he called 'SUCOR.' If anyone could have prepared for something like this, it's him."

"Do you really think that an AI, a computer program, will help us against... against *them*?" William asked, his voice laced with profound doubt, bordering on outright disbelief.

"I don't think we have a choice left, William," Taylor whispered, his voice fading slightly, as if he were already moving, already embarking on his desperate, impossible quest. "We're running out of options. And we are rapidly running out of time." The radio then clicked, signaling the abrupt end of their desperate transmission, leaving William ut-

terly alone in the chilling, blood-soaked silence of the ravaged base.

William shut his eyes tightly, banging his head against the wall again, a raw frustration he couldn't contain. But then, a sudden memory jolted him, sharp and immediate. The hard drive. Raymond.

"Wait... there was a hard drive Raymond forced into my armor before I..." William panted, heavy, ragged breathing filling the silence on the comms. "Know anything about that?"

No response. William's worry intensified, turning to outright panic, until his helmet display flickered violently to life, showing an incoming text message from Taylor Hall.

TAYLOR HALL (Text): Can't talk, soldiers too close. I will provide more information where I can. I'll get the maps activated in your suit's HUD. See if you can patch yourself up. Good luck, William.

William slumped his head, an unknown, crushing weight pressing down on his shoulders. He pushed himself upright, gathered his composure, rigorously assessed the damage to his wounds and armor, and began the grim, solitary walk toward the nearby infirmary.

Meanwhile, Taylor Hall, nestled deep within a quiet corner of the maintenance hall network, peered through a small, reinforced hatch overlooking the Sol Union Corp's main atrium. Below, two of the converted zombie soldiers patrolled with unnerving, mechanical movements.

"If there's anything human still in there... please forgive me... I never knew it would come this far... I never believed him," he muttered to himself, his voice laced with profound guilt.

He scanned his tablet, which was miraculously still connected to the Sol Union Corp's highly-classified systems. His mind raced, seeking a remote access point, any form of escape route. While still monitoring William's distant signal, he stumbled upon a way to remotely activate his armor's navigation system. He set it off, a desperate, silent prayer for the Corporal's safety.

Still focused on the tablet, a new, unexpected option appeared: remote activation of the fire alarms in a distant, unpopulated part of the facility. Thinking the zombie soldiers might respond like instinct-driven predators weeding out weak prey,

or simply a distraction, he triggered the remote alarm.

The soldiers reacted instantly, their heads snapping up. They began grunting and muttering to each other in a series of disturbing, guttural sounds as they sprinted toward the distant sound, disappearing from his view.

"I was not expecting that to work..." Taylor Hall said, a hint of genuine surprise and momentary relief in his voice.

He seized the opportunity, bolting through the labyrinthine Maintenance Halls, his heart pounding a frantic rhythm against his ribs, making his way toward Dr. Hendricks's office. His desperate journey mirrored William's forced movement, a solitary dash into the heart of the chaos.

William arrived at the infirmary by forcing open the heavily reinforced door with a shoulder charge. The scene inside was a fresh wave of horror. The bodies of the nurses and medical staff were torn apart, the room a gruesome canvas of blood, viscera, and bits of flesh. He took a moment to observe the carnage, mentally hardening his heart, pushing the emotional trauma down, forcing him-

self forward. Wounded still, he desperately needed medical supplies.

He raided a main medical cabinet, finding high-grade healing ointments and rolls of self-sealing bandages. Setting his rifle aside on a nearby counter—a risky but necessary move—he tore open the medical supplies. He applied them swiftly to his burns; their advanced properties practically wiped away the blood and regenerated damaged tissue like wet paint being removed from a canvas. The sting of the ointments forced William to grit his teeth, breathing through the intense, burning sensation.

Once his wounds were covered and his adrenaline had settled slightly, William started to search the infirmary for a hidden snack fridge, hoping to gather rations. He found one tucked away in the back, near some defunct computer terminals, and began stashing packs of nutrient crackers and bottles of purified water into his I.F. (Intra-Field) Storage Packs. Whether for himself or for any survivors he might come across, whatever was to happen next, he needed provisions. To prepare for the remote possibility of finding more survivors,

William grabbed whatever spare medical supplies he could to stash in his armor's compartments.

He froze when a guttural clicking sound broke the silence from behind him. Similar to the chattering of a large, predatory lizard, the clicking was paired with low hisses and menacing growls. The sounds grew rapidly louder as the creature revealed itself, dropping silently from the ceiling—it was an "Insecto." Its skin was a sickly brown, leathery, and glisteningly moist; multiple eyes glowed malevolently, razor-sharp claws protruded from its fingers, and thick, bone-like spikes jutted out from its skin. With a set of prominent red eyes focused entirely on him, this was William's first undeniable, terrifying look at a true daemonster.

"What... the fuck..." William breathed, utterly shocked into momentary paralysis.

The Insecto lunged with impossible speed, gripping him violently by the shoulders. With his primary weapons out of reach on the counter, he was forced to use his immediate surroundings to fight. The creature's agility, similar to that of a big cat, allowed it to constantly be on the move, seeming to toy with him before delivering a killing blow.

William, trying desperately to assess how to fight back, reached for his rifle, but the creature launched a small, concentrated fireball from its mouth. Adrenaline pumping through his veins, William managed to launch himself at the Insecto, wounding it with shards of glass from a broken cabinet. A desperate struggle ensued, the Insecto attempting to claw at William as it was being forced into the wrecked cabinet.

William scanned his immediate surroundings for a weapon to kill the Insecto. His gaze landed on a surgical saw lying on a nearby operating table. He quickly jumped for it, snatching the serrated blade. The Insecto, eager to kill its assailant before he could arm himself, jumped away from the cabinet. William positioned himself to charge, surgical saw in hand. The two launched at one another in a blur of motion. William killed the Insecto instantly, shoving the surgical saw with all his might through the side of its head, severing its brain stem.

The Insecto's body dropped heavily to the floor as William caught his breath, his chest heaving. "What in the fuck are you?!"

Radio static suddenly interfered with William's chaotic thoughts. It was a silent, unacknowledged transmission from Sergeant Kelso.

"This is Sergeant Kelso, transmitting from Sol Union Corp Bunker D00ME2, requesting immediate response from any Sol Union Corp militia personnel who can hear me."

William adjusted his comms unit and armor, opening his radio communications channel.

"Sergeant. This is Corporal Thompson. I'm currently in the sublevel 7 infirmary."

There was a noticeable, heavy pause over the radio.

"Corporal? Thompson? It's damn good to hear from you. Were you able to locate Dr. Raymond?"

"Yessir. But, he was lost when the invaders hit. He inhaled some red mist that turned him feral. I had no other choice but to terminate him."

"That's unfortunate, soldier, but understood. I've received multiple reports of a similar mist across the base... all turning good folk into these... *things*."

William remembered Taylor Hall's frantic explanation.

"Sergeant, Dr. Hall believes the mist is the result of a bioweapon... one that releases some kind of mind-control parasite."

"Parasite? What about the mutations? The things we've been fighting don't look like any parasite I've ever seen."

"Mutations?"

"The invaders, son, the ones that look like goddamn daemonsters... the mist seems to be able to cause rapid, grotesque mutation in who it infects, turning the hosts into these horrific creatures..."

William looked down at the corpse of the Insecto, a sickening, cold realization washing over him. The thing he had just killed was, or at least had been, one of the men he had subdued earlier.

"What's the mission objective, Sergeant?"

"Link up with any militia you come across, gather any survivors you find, and haul your ass down here to the bunker! From your current position, you should be able to get to the weapons labs, while on your way, and find some better gear. Do you know Dr. Hall's whereabouts?"

"Sir, last I heard from him, he was using the maintenance ways to get to Dr. Hendricks's quarters."

"What the hell does he think he's doing there?"

"He believed Hendricks might have something, some technology, that could turn the tide of the invasion..."

There was a light muttering over the radio transmission from Sergeant Kelso, a muffled grumbling under his breath.

"Then I guess we have no choice but to let him try. Get to work, Corporal, and good job making it this far. I'll attempt to establish contact with other units. I believe your boarding buddy Frandsen won't be far from you. Stay alert, marine, stay alive. Kelso out."

William gathered his weapons, the heavy weight of his rifle a new comfort, his attention caught by the sudden appearance of a detailed map in his helmet's HUD.

"I'm probably being an idiot for waiting this long," William sighed, a wry, grim acknowledgment of his situation, "but about damn time..."

With his rifle clutched tight and his plasma pistol secured to his armor, William burst from the infirmary, driven by a singular, desperate objective: survival and a search for answers. The journey ahead was his alone, a mirror reflecting the sheer, bone-deep desperation that propelled him forward into the dark.

Taylor Hall sought refuge in a quiet, secluded corner of the maintenance hall network, taking a brief, precious moment to reclaim his breath and strategize. His tablet materialized in his hands, its screen illuminating as he began to scrutinize William's movements on the map. A sharp text alert sliced through the silence, announcing an incoming message from the enigmatic Dr. Samael Hendricks.

"What the hell do you want now, you crazy bastard?" Taylor muttered, his thumb hovering over the message icon. He opened it, revealing an attached video file—security footage, it seemed. A closer inspection revealed its highly classified origin: the restricted Deimos Classified Operations station.

It appears that my successor to the field expeditions is to blame for this predicament.

Taylor's fingers flew across the screen, his response biting and swift.

We all tried to warn you about Neurton, Dr. Hendricks... now countless are dead or dying, and the invasion has begun.

He sent the message, then tapped the video file. No sound accompanied the chilling, silent visuals. The footage began with the precise, sickening moment Alicia Neurton's blade had met a scientist's throat, her subsequent cold consumption of his blood unveiling the gruesome events that followed as the remaining scientists scrambled desperately to another section of the facility. Taylor Hall's face filled with a canvas of shock, disgust, and unadulterated horror as he watched. His visible distress was abruptly interrupted by another incoming message from Dr. Hendricks.

I accept full and absolute responsibility for the events that transpire before us. When I first received an alert that Alicia had lowered the magnetic barriers of the teleportation chambers, I knew it was already too late. Observe what you can of the video; it

was the best I was able to recover from the heavily encrypted servers. I am currently meeting with the United Nation and Galactic Councils to discuss further contingencies if we cannot contain the invasion at its source. Other facilities have managed to shut down the entryways, thanks to my earlier protocols... as for Pluto... that still needs assessed and dealt with.

Taylor continued to watch, the silent video now depicting the cult-like scientists, preparing meticulously in another part of the facility, readying themselves to enter a portal alongside Alicia Neurton. The screen flickered to static, then cleared as the group vanished through the shimmering gateway. Moments later, Alicia Neurton burst back through the portal—she was scared, scarred, and drenched in a terrifying amount of blood. Pure panic etched every line of her face as she ran for her life, pursued by an unseen horror. She lunged for a computer terminal, desperate to activate high-level security protocols. The still-wet blood on her hand allowed her to scrawl a final, indecipherable message on a nearby wall, obscured just outside the camera's view.

A figure materialized silently behind her, clad in a solemn, dark tunic and adorned with metallic, archaic religious accoutrements. It wielded a staff topped with a crescent moon-shaped blade. Human in overall appearance, yet with ghastly white, pallid skin and prominent, glowing red eyes, it was a Hell Priest, the one known as Dagan.

Alicia turned to face the entity, attempting to project a semblance of defiance, but she was too terrified, too broken, to compose herself. She appeared to be bargaining frantically, perhaps for her very existence. The Hell Priest approached her slowly, its grotesque, unnervingly wide grin the only response to her desperate pleas. Dagan raised his staff, the blade arcing in one fluid, terrifying motion. Alicia Neurton's body slumped lifelessly to the floor, her head cleanly severed from her neck. The sickening impact of her fall sent the first physical tremor through the entire Sol Union Corp base, signaling the grim, brutal commencement of the full invasion.

"Jesus Christ..." Taylor gasped, the word escaping him in a ragged, terrified whisper.

The video concluded with Dagan effortlessly lifting Alicia Neurton's severed head with a single hand before stepping back through the portal, vanishing into the shimmering red gateway. A guttural, daemonic growl wrenched Taylor Hall's attention away from the screen, snapping him back to the perilous reality. He snapped his tablet shut and moved quietly, desperately, through the maintenance shafts, every nerve alive with mounting dread.

The dread of the catastrophe unfolding around them continually built for both men. William Thompson exited a heavy elevator, taking him down to Sublevel 6. Nearby directional signs indicated a maternity ward, next to staff living quarters and various other storage facilities, with the crucial weapons labs further down the corridor. William's map, now active on his HUD, charted a direct course to the weapons lab. However, his attention was violently drawn towards a broken video monitor flashing near the entrance to the maternity ward, and a familiar lab coat and nametag belonging to a Dr. Marianne Fagin, tossed aside like trash. Blood covered the walls in thick,

sickening streaks, with the bodies of staff and patients thrown about in a gruesome display. William entered the maternity ward, fearing with every fiber of his being what he may find there.

6

Thy Flesh…

The absolute silence in the desolate maternity ward was deafening, broken only by the crunching, sickening sound of William's combat boots. They ground against a grotesque layer of scattered debris that blanketed the floor—shattered medical glass, twisted instruments, and unspeakable, sickeningly organic matter. William, Corporal William Thompson of the Sol Union Corp militia, moved with the practiced, coiled caution of a veteran soldier. His eyes, narrowed to slits, scanned the ruin for any tremor of life, any flicker of hostile movement, but found only a profound, suffocating stillness.

The air was a thick, chemical soup, heavy with the sharp, metallic tang of dried blood and the

acrid, telltale smell of ozone, the noxious residue of the cataclysm that had swept through. With a mask of grim resignation, William used the toe of his boot to prod several of the lifeless forms, confirming their stillness—a grim, professional check—before moving deeper into the ward's haunting expanse.

His intense gaze snagged, unexpectedly, on a lone computer terminal, a miraculous island of functionality in the sea of destruction. Its screen flickered erratically with the ghost of normal life: a medical staff training video appeared to be playing on an endless, tragic loop. William took a deep, shuddering breath, the air burning his lungs, and pressed the 'play' command—a desperate, almost futile bid for a moment's mental reprieve, or perhaps, a vital clue to the unit's destruction.

The video snapped into vivid, sterile focus, its brightly lit scene a jarring, almost painful contrast to the ruin surrounding him. A Maternity Nurse, her uniform impeccably crisp and her demeanor a perfect blend of professional competence and gentle warmth, guided a woman named Marianne Fagin toward a clean examination table. In a chair

by the wall, a figure in a heavy, battered suit of battle armor—William's brother-in-arms, Thomas Frandsen—bounced his leg with a nervous, barely contained energy that belied his armored bulk. A single, glistening tear, a pure expression of overwhelming joy, traced a clean, stark path down the grime and sweat streaking his cheek.

The screen shifted, transitioning to a serene, intimate scene that momentarily stole William's breath. Marianne, now sitting up in a hospital bed, her hair attractively disheveled from rest, was bathed in a soft, ethereal glow that illuminated the delicate features of her face. Opposite her, on a smaller, dedicated monitor, sat the Maternity Nurse, her smile radiating a deep, comforting reassurance. "Alright, Ms. Fagin, how are we feeling today?" the nurse's voice, warm and incredibly reassuring, cut through the digital space, a haunting echo of the normalcy that had been violently stolen.

Marianne's reply was a little shaky, a nervous tremor betraying the calm she tried to project. "Good, good. I've had some sporadic nausea, you know, the morning sickness, but nothing too dra-

matic." A small, self-deprecating smile touched her lips, a brief, fragile light in the memory.

The nurse chuckled, a genuine, melodious sound. "Lucky girl," she smirked playfully. "Your latest tests all came back clean. Absolutely no signs of any issues for you or the little one." Her gaze shifted slightly, a subtle acknowledgment of someone off-screen, likely a technical assistant.

Thomas, still anchored in his worn armchair, was now openly weeping with uninhibited joy, his broad shoulders shaking with the profound force of his emotions. He clumsily wiped at his eyes with the back of a gauntleted hand, a choked sob escaping his lips. The nurse's voice, now infused with a teasing, playful lilt, drew his attention. "So, is the shaking soldier boy here the father?" she quipped, a playful, knowing glint dancing in her eyes.

Marianne's eyes, soft and luminous with deep affection, met Thomas's. A shared smile, tender and overflowing with the silent language of a lifetime of unspoken promises, blossomed between them. "Yes, yes he is," she confirmed, her voice thick with emotion, each word a testament to the depth of their love and commitment.

"Good choice," the nurse winked, a warm, conspiratorial look crossing her face. She turned, retrieving a futuristic, sleek computer monitor, its advanced design hinting at cutting-edge medical technology, for the upcoming ultrasound. She set it up carefully beside Marianne, the screen humming softly as it powered to life. Her gaze settled invitingly on Thomas. "So, dad-to-be, you want to come over here? It's about time for the baby's first pictures."

Thomas rose from his chair, a man utterly overwhelmed, his usual soldierly composure completely shattered. Words failed him, trapped somewhere between his bursting, joyful heart and his trembling lips. He stumbled forward, his combat boots clanking softly on the floor, gripping Marianne's hand with desperate intensity, his fingers intertwining with hers as if to anchor himself to reality. He leaned in, pressing a tender, silent kiss to her temple, a wordless prayer of gratitude and hope. Marianne's eyes welled up, shimmering with unshed tears of happiness, as the nurse, with practiced and profound gentleness, lifted her shirt, exposing her burgeoning abdomen—a canvas of

new, unfolding life. The ultrasound machine hummed to life, a low, comforting thrumming sound. The nurse applied the transducer to Marianne's abdomen, a cool, clear gel slowly releasing from the device, spreading across her skin. In mere moments, the screen revealed a detailed image of the fetus, surprisingly large and distinct, a tiny, recognizable human form taking shape before their astonished eyes. The nurse adjusted the transducer with expert finesse, centering it over the tiny, flickering figure. Then, a sound that transcended time and space, the strong, rhythmic *thud-thud-thud*\ of a heartbeat, echoed loudly and clearly through the room's speakers.

William, watching the video, felt a fresh wave of tears, hot and stinging, burning in his eyes. He was transported instantly back to the first time he'd heard his own son, Flynn's, heartbeat during an ultrasound—a memory both infinitely precious and now achingly, devastatingly painful.

"The baby is a bit on the big side," the Maternity Nurse announced, her voice a calm, scientific counterpoint to the powerful, thrumming heart-

beat, "but the heart is strong as ever. Everything looks perfect."

Thomas, unable to contain his profound elation, enveloped Marianne in a tight, protective embrace, their bodies pressing together in a desperate, joyous communion. Their lips met in a fervent, soul-deep kiss, a pure outpouring of shared exhilaration, a silent, powerful symphony of their boundless love and hope for the future.

"So, everything is good?" Thomas asked, his voice cracking with immense relief, a raw, almost childlike vulnerability in his tone. "Nothing… nothing wrong at all?" His gaze, filled with a mixture of overwhelming hope and residual fear, sought absolute reassurance from the nurse.

The nurse smiled reassuringly, her eyes crinkling at the corners with genuine happiness for them. "Don't worry yourselves. We've been closely monitoring everything. And based on the advanced samples we've collected so far from Ms. Fagin… we can now say with full confidence that you two are expecting a happy, perfectly healthy… baby girl."

Marianne and Thomas stared at the nurse, momentarily stunned into silence, their minds struggling to process the impossible, wonderful news that had just fundamentally changed their world.

"It's... a girl!" Marianne whispered, her voice barely audible, choked with emotion. Tears streamed down her face—a cascade of pure, unadulterated joy that could not be held back.

The nurse nodded, a warm, knowing smile on her lips, visibly sharing in their profound, incandescent happiness. Marianne and Thomas, as if pulled by an irresistible, invisible force, pulled each other into a full, desperate embrace, their joy palpable, radiating outwards, filling the sterile room with an almost incandescent glow. Thomas rested his heavily-armored head on Marianne's forehead, taking a deep, shuddering breath, composing himself in the overwhelming moment. William's eyes narrowed, a cold, anticipatory dread washing over him as he noticed Thomas fumbling nervously in a small interior pocket of his armor. A small engagement ring box, its velvet exterior glinting subtly in the harsh hospital light, emerged. Thomas carefully palmed it, muttering something to Mari-

anne, too softly for the video's microphone to capture. To William, the entire scene was agonizingly familiar, a cruel, precise echo of his own tragically interrupted past.

Thomas was about to propose. The culmination of their journey.

But before he could pop the question, before he could speak the words that would officially bind them, the first tremor hit the medical facility. Confusion, sharp and instant, rippled through everyone visible in the video feed.

"What the hell is going on? An aftershock?" Thomas yelled, his voice strained and instantly reverting to a combat-ready sharpness.

Marianne was hyperventilating, pure, unadulterated terror etched into the soft lines of her face. The nurses immediately tried to calm her, while Thomas frantically assessed their surroundings, his eyes darting to structural supports and exit routes. The second, more violent tremor struck, rattling the room and shaking the medical equipment violently. Then the third, stronger still. An automated evacuation announcement blared shrilly through the video's speakers, its synthesized voice ironically

calm. Thomas, driven by instinct, grabbed Marianne's hand, and they bolted off-camera, disappearing into the chaos. The video cut out abruptly, leaving only the chilling, amplified sound of the maternity staff screaming in raw, hysterical terror.

"I should've taken you up on that offer, Thomas..." William murmured to himself, the words heavy with a suffocating, unbearable regret. He felt the weight of every unspent moment, every missed opportunity, pressing down on him.

He forced himself to take a moment, struggling to compose his shattered nerves and focus on the present danger. His attention was abruptly snagged by a distant, rhythmic pattern of metallic bangs. The sound was too structured, too consistent, too deliberate to be random debris clanking in the continuing chaos. It was a signal. William adjusted his grip on his heavy-duty plasma weapon, aiming it at the maternity ward's entrance as he positioned himself strategically against the frame. The metallic bangs continued, growing louder, closer, drawing him in. He focused his senses, trying to pinpoint the source through the auditory rubble.

"This is Corporal William Thompson with Sol Union Corp militia," he said, his voice cutting through the thick radio static, strained but holding firm. "Can anyone read me? Identify yourself."

The metal bangs grew louder, closer, undoubtedly within the building now.

"If you can read me," William continued, his voice echoing with a strained urgency, "and are unable to reach a comm, sound off twice. I repeat, sound off twice."

Clang. Clang.

Two distinct metallic bangs, resonant with a desperate, impossibly familiar hope, echoed through the cavernous, ruined hall. Survivors? A sudden, powerful surge of resolve, a quiet, professional strength, settled over William. He was a soldier, and he was in charge now. He had a duty.

He moved quickly, efficiently, through the grotesque landscape of scattered bodies and shattered infrastructure, his boots crunching mercilessly on the debris. The metallic bangs grew louder, clearer, pulling him forward like a lifeline. "Keep sounding off," he broadcast over the radio, his voice a steady, authoritative anchor in the sur-

rounding chaos. “I’m almost to your position. Stay put!”

The source of the sound was a small, nondescript supply closet, its entrance a chaotic, impenetrable barricade of heavy, twisted metallic debris, shelves, and lockers. A voice, weak but impossibly, devastatingly familiar, called out from within the fortress of metal. “Corporal! Thompson! In here!”

Adrenaline, cold and sharp, surged through William’s veins, lending him an almost superhuman strength. He tore savagely at the twisted metal, grunting with raw effort and desperation, until the last massive chunk flew aside, smashing against the opposite wall. With a final, heaving yank, he tore the door open. Initially, the closet appeared empty, then Thomas’s voice, a ghost of its former booming self, spoke again, muffled. “Over here, behind the shelves… near the emergency oxygen tanks…”

Thomas dropped the heavy, dented metal bar that had been his desperate signal, the sound echoing hollowly as William practically fell inside.

The supply closet, a cramped, hidden space deep within the sublevel SIX main corridor of Sol

Union Corp, was a scene of grim, profound intimacy. William found Thomas slumped against the far wall, his face pale and drawn, a wounded woman cradled protectively in his arms. It was Marianne. Thomas's imposing battle armor, heavy and deeply dented, lay beside them as if carefully placed to shield them, his worn fatigues exposed beneath.

"Jesus, Frandsen… Thomas. How the hell did you manage to get this far?" William knelt instantly, his voice thick with disbelief, concern, and a wave of almost debilitating relief.

Thomas chuckled, a dry, painful, raspy sound that scraped his throat. "I was trying to protect my lucky lady, brother… I didn't want her to die alone." A hacking, wracking cough seized his body.

"Save your energy. Don't talk yet. I've got some supplies." William focused on his medkit, quickly producing the nutrient-rich, high-concentration juices he'd salvaged from the infirmary. He uncapped one for Thomas, helping him to drink slowly, while Thomas still held Marianne close, his grip unyielding.

"Hun, I don't... it hurts," Marianne whispered, her voice barely audible, terrifyingly weak.

William set aside the bottle, his gaze fixed on Marianne's injuries. He helped Thomas gently roll her forward, the better to examine the damage. Blood covered everything, mostly superficial cuts and severe scrapes, but then William noticed the horrifying, excessive tissue loss and pooling blood between her legs. A sickening, undeniable realization dawned in his mind, freezing the blood in his veins.

"We'll be okay baby... we'll be okay," Thomas murmured desperately, tears silently building in his eyes, his voice cracking as he attempted to comfort her with a lie they both knew was hollow. Everyone in that tiny closet knew the devastating, silent truth, an agony that hung heavy and suffocating in the air—Marianne had lost the baby, their little girl, in the madness of the evacuation.

"Let's see if we can get you bandaged up, Marianne. We need to stop the bleeding..." William's voice was strained, a deep breath barely containing his own surging, personal grief.

Marianne looked up to Thomas, her face etched with a quiet, terrible acceptance of her fate. "I'm okay, William… save it for someone else…"

William respected her final wishes instantly, the profound respect of one soldier for a dying wish. His head dropped momentarily, his heart shattering again in his chest.

"Did I hear you watching the maternity video, William?" Thomas's voice was shockingly calm, almost conversational, the voice of a man coming to terms with his end.

William nodded slowly. "Yeah. I did."

"I thought so. I wanted to thank you for watching it… I wanted to make sure it didn't go to waste."

"Why?" William asked, dread filling the void.

"Of all the places for it to end… I wouldn't want to be forgotten in a damn storage closet on a desert planet\! At least someone saw her face one last time." Thomas laughed, a dry, brittle sound devoid of all true humor. William, recognizing the deep, suffocating darkness creeping into Thomas's mind, struggled desperately to hold his compo-

sure. Thomas did not expect to leave this closet alive. He had made his choice.

"But it seemed like the closest thing to keep from getting eaten by those fucking pink things that charged us… They couldn't get past the door."

William searched for a way, any way, to change the conversation, to offer a sliver of light in the encroaching gloom. "The baby… did you two think of a name? For the girl?"

Marianne's face softened, a gentle, beautiful smile gracing her lips, the last flicker of her joy. She managed to sit up with a sudden, painful burst of strength, burying her face into Thomas's neck in one last, profound loving embrace.

"If it was gonna be a boy, we were thinking 'Michael Thomas Roy'," Thomas began, tears welling freely in his eyes. "And, for a girl… 'Alicia Lillian Ireena,' or 'Emilia Harper'." He was no longer able to hold back his tears, the grief overwhelming him.

Marianne lifted her head, her hand trembling as she wiped his eyes with a tender, loving touch before kissing him softly on the cheek. "Don't forget their last name… Frandsen."

Thomas was momentarily surprised, his emotions intensifying, the implication sinking in. "What?"

Marianne stared into his eyes, tears brimming in her own, her voice a final declaration. "I want our family to have your last name, Thomas. I want to marry you… I would have said yes."

Thomas gripped Marianne tight, too emotional, too heartbroken to speak a single word. William, even in his own despair and crushing loss, found himself openly crying.

Then, Marianne's body, with an awful, finality, began to fall limp in Thomas's arms. William froze, every muscle locking up in horror.

"Mary? Mary?" Thomas's voice was a frantic, terrified whisper, the sound of a man watching his world end. He slowly loosened his grip, his gaze fixed on Marianne's pale, lifeless face, and the devastating realization hit him: she had just died in his arms. He clutched her body tighter, his breath coming in ragged, desperate gasps. William remained frozen at the sight, the sheer agony of Thomas's complete and utter loss, of losing every-

thing that mattered, mirroring his own deep despair.

"Thomas… you need to come with me," William's voice was a tearful, desperate plea.

"Corporal… William. I think you need to go…"

William took a deep, fortifying breath, steeling himself against the overwhelming grief. "You coming with me to end this, soldier? For her?"

Thomas glared at William, a look of pure, cold finality in his eyes, then reached for his discarded armor. His hand settled on an emergency release mechanism, triggering it. A faint *hiss* sounded as the armor released everything it was carrying.

"Do you believe the old stories of beings from other worlds choosing to reincarnate as us, William?" Thomas asked, his voice weak, his mind clearly made up.

William took a moment to process Thomas's actions, observing the considerable load his armor had just released – mostly high-grade weaponry, ammo clips, and fragmentation grenades. "I'm not sure what to believe anymore, Thomas… not after this."

Thomas reached into his pocket one last time, pulling out a blood-soaked, wrinkled picture of him and Marianne, taken years ago. "I don't blame you… I'd be the same…" He extended the photograph to William, but still held a tight, proprietary grip on one corner.

"What is it?" William asked, his voice barely a whisper.

"Can I ask a final favor, from one man who went through shit to another that's drowning in it?" Thomas's voice cracked with deep, profound tears as he struggled to breathe through the heartache. "Don't let us be remembered like this, not as just more bodies for these monsters to snack on… Take whatever you think you might need from my load, William, you're gonna need everything you can get your hands on for what's out there… Just leave me one grenade…"

William looked at Thomas, trying desperately to suppress the horror and understanding in his eyes.

"Please, man, just one grenade. The unstable medical supplies they keep in these supply closets will do the rest of the job… I can't let my girls be

alone like this, not even in death. And, I think, some of those fucking things that killed everyone can teleport on their own... I have to protect what little of them I can for good."

William nodded, his jaw tight. "You have my word, brother. I'll make them pay."

"And just in case I somehow come back, you and me are gonna rip whatever bastard who brought these things out a new one." Thomas finally relinquished the photo. William took it, making a fist with the same hand and pounding it against Thomas's own, a silent, powerful soldier's oath.

"I wish I could've gotten to know you better brother, taken you up on that drink..." William began gathering what supplies he could from Thomas's generous offering, carefully, deliberately leaving the single, requested fragmentation grenade behind.

"Then at least the memory of me lives vicariously through you, William," Thomas smirked faintly through his tears, a final flash of his old spirit. "The weapons labs here have some shiny toys I've only ever gotten glimpses of, but you're

gonna need something much stronger than the plasma pea shooters they give us when we start. I was out there earlier, trying to get some supplies for Marianne… I swore a bunch of those things set up a buffet further down the corridor, past the main junction…"

William placed a hand firmly on Thomas's shoulder, a final, wordless salute. "Thank you. Marianne was a smart girl to choose you. You're a good man."

Thomas smiled, a true, gentle smile, gripping Marianne's body tighter, pulling her close one last time as William left the closet to make his solitary way to the weapons lab. When the coast was clear, and he knew William was gone, Thomas shuffled himself carefully, digging out the velvet engagement ring box from his pocket and slowly sliding the diamond ring onto Marianne's left hand, a silent, eternal commitment.

He sighed in profound despair, the sound tearing from his chest. "You deserved so much better than me, better than this horrific end. But because of you, I was a better man. All I ever wanted was to return the favor, to have your back forever as

you always had mine. You were the woman of my dreams, the fire to my heart, my best friend. I love you, Mary. I loved everything about you, even when you thought you looked horrible there was no one else I wanted more. Even like this, especially now…"

The unmistakable, sickening sounds of daemonsteric hisses and guttural growls approaching caught Thomas's attention, drawing inexorably closer. He slowly, gently moved Marianne's body so it would sit upright next to him, her limp limbs seemingly trying to hold on to her fiancé. Thomas gripped the fragmentation grenade tightly, his thumb resting on the safety pin, his eyes fixed on the closet door as the daemonsters came closer, their shuffling steps audible now. He stared at Marianne, then kissed her forehead one last time. "I guess it's time to go home, hun. Wait for me."

Just as he was about to act, a disembodied voice, impossibly clear, whispered in the air, its source unknown, seeming to emanate from everywhere and nowhere. It sounded exactly like a young girl, faint and ethereal. "Daddy, the fight's

not over. Mommy is waiting for you… you have to finish it."

In the main corridor of Sublevel Six, not far from the now-silent supply closet, Corporal William Thompson made his way towards the weapons lab, the blood-soaked picture of Thomas and Marianne still clutched in his hand like a new purpose. He glanced back towards the supply closet, just as the echoing, triumphant daemonsteric growls were abruptly, violently suppressed by the sharp, deafening blast of a grenade explosion and a secondary, chemical detonation. Thomas and Marianne were officially gone.

"A great man, and a patient woman, that's how I'll remember you, Thomas. Everything I wished I could be." William sighed, the weight of the photo heavy in his palm. He tucked it carefully into a secure pocket in his pants, a sacred memento and a grim reminder, and continued his solitary, fueled journey to the Weapons Lab, his mission clear: survival and vengeance.

7

CONSUMED

Taylor Hall emerged from a maintenance hall, the transition jarring, violent, and complete. The harsh, utilitarian glare of the fluorescent lights, which had only moments ago cast his shadow in stark relief against the oil-stained concrete, and the acrid reek of spilled hydraulic fluid and ozone, were instantly replaced by the hushed, almost cathedral-like opulence of the Sol Union Corp's executive suite. The air here was filtered, chilled, and carried a faint, almost sterile scent of expensive leather and polished wood—a world away from the charnel house he'd just traversed.

His boots, heavy with the dried Martian dust of the facility's lower levels and tragically stained with the deep crimson gore of the recent, brutal con-

flict, seemed an unforgivable insult to the pristine, polished marble floor. The offices of the facility's highest-ranking members lined the corridor, a defiant, utterly untouched bubble of tranquility. The heavy, polished doors of mahogany and brass stood like silent, arrogant sentinels, utterly separate from the invasion ripping through the rest of the station. A sharp pang of bewildered, searing frustration hit Hall—a visceral reaction to the unfairness of it all. How could this sanctuary, this monument to corporate excess, remain so immaculately protected while the rest of the station was a charnel house, a slaughterhouse of scientific and military personnel?

Shaking his head to clear the irrational, almost paralyzing anger, Taylor refocused on the core of his objective: Dr. Samael Hendricks's private office. His strides became purposeful and quick, the echo of his boots against the marble the only sound in the oppressive silence.

He reached the heavy, ornate door, its dark wood inlaid with a fine, almost invisible bronze wire, his hand already extended for the smooth, cold handle, only to find it stubbornly, impossibly

locked. A deep, guttural sound of pure annoyance rumbled in his chest. "God dammit, Hendricks!" Taylor muttered, the growl swallowed instantly by the thick silence of the suite. Sol Union Corp Standard Operating Procedures, carved in stone and brass plaques throughout the facility, dictated that all doors remain unlocked in a Level 5, facility-wide emergency. "Now I know you've got something hiding in here, you paranoid bastard."

He pulled out his personal tablet, its screen a small, frantic square of cold, blue light in the dim corridor. With practiced, furious efficiency, the result of years spent skirting corporate firewalls, he established a quick, backdoor connection to the facility's mainframe. Next, he activated a custom-built decryption program—a digital skeleton key crafted during his more rebellious days. A silent, purely digital battle commenced against the sophisticated, military-grade locks Hendricks had so meticulously, and criminally, placed on his private office, a clear violation of every safety protocol.

For William Thompson, the desperate, bloody battle was only ramping up, not winding down. He strode into the weapons lab, Sub-Level 6, the

air thick with a metallic tang of unspent, contained energy and the ghostly, unmistakable smell of burnt circuits and melted polymers. Even amidst the chaos, he couldn't help but admire the sheer, sophisticated brilliance of the gleaming technology that filled the room—weapons that seemed like they would shine with an almost heavenly, scientific glow if they were not currently soaked in deep crimson.

He swept the labyrinthine room with a focused, tactical gaze, finding a glittering, overwhelming array of various experimental gadgets and exotic weapons locked behind reinforced, impact-resistant glass cases. His attention was immediately drawn to two open cases, their display panels still glowing with detailed, complex information about the contents. One case, violently pried open, had once held a monstrous, intimidatingly heavy-duty weapon labeled "Horde Annihilation Gun," its tag now dangling precariously by a single, frayed wire. The other displayed the information for a "Plasma Bladed Chainsaw." William moved deeper into the lab, his senses on high alert, to find even more exotic and terrifying weapons.

He found himself genuinely impressed by the terrifying possibilities, taking a brief, tactical moment to observe his overwhelming options.

"What the hell kind of fight were you dumb bastards prepping for?" William mumbled, his voice a low, dumbfounded rasp, swallowed by the echo-filled, steel chamber.

William started a frantic, systematic raid on the armory's contents. He stashed as many grenades as his armored suit could grasp—frag, plasma, incendiary, and experimental vortex varieties—into his armor's utility pockets and loops before moving onto the heavier, primary weapons. He found a massive, intimidating Heavy Plasma Rifle, its barrel still faintly warm from a recent test firing, and strapped it across his back.

A symphony of hellish squeals and wet, guttural grunts suddenly echoed in the room, making the hair on William's neck stand up with icy dread. William spun, instantly confronted by a new, more terrifying daemonster. It was a sickening, biological nightmare: its hide was a thick, rubbery pink, its head dominated by a disgustingly large, fanged mouth that stretched into an impossible grin. Be-

neath what looked like plates of armored flesh were impossibly primate-like muscles, and a single, sharp horn jutted menacingly from its brow. A segmented, shrimp-like tail whipped the air behind it like a cable. In its monstrous, drooling maw, the creature—which William instantly, internally dubbed the "Pink Gorilla Shark Beast"—held the partially eaten, shredded torso of a Sol Union Corp soldier. The dead soldier's hand still clutched a sleek, futuristic chainsaw. William instantly realized this was one of the creatures that the late Frandsen had bravely, selflessly confronted.

"Aren't you ugly?" William said, a grimace of pure disgust twisting his face beneath his visor.

The Pink Gorilla Shark Beast dropped the mutilated soldier's corpse with a wet, heavy thump and started a terrifying, ground-shaking charge toward William, its small eyes fixed on him with predatory intent. William managed to duck barely, rolling behind a massive, titanium pillar as the beast rammed itself with explosive force into a series of delicate computer panels, sending sparks and shrapnel flying. William quickly grabbed his standard-issue plasma rifle and opened fire, a blind-

ing, sustained hail of blue energy bolts, while simultaneously making his way toward the dropped chainsaw. Each shot barely showed any effect, sizzling on the Pink Gorilla Shark Beast's thick hide like water on a hot stone, doing nothing but enraging the creature. The beast pulled itself free of the wreckage, already revving up for another, more focused charge toward William.

William launched himself through the air, diving for the weapon with a desperate, reckless abandon. He barely managed to grasp the chainsaw's grip and activate it an instant before the beast hit him, the shimmering, plasma blade cleanly bisecting the entire, massive creature right through its mouth and down the middle. It died instantly, the two halves of its body sliding apart with a sickening squelch. William collapsed to the ground, chest heaving, catching his breath and realizing the sheer, impossible violence he had just committed. He admired the blade, which truly resembled a flowing, captured stream of pure, blue plasma in the place of regular metal teeth. A hysterical, high-pitched laugh of pure, overwhelming excitement

bubbled up, adrenaline flooding his entire system, chasing away the fear.

"You're coming with me!" William said to the chainsaw, strapping the heavy weapon securely to his back with the magnetic locks on his armor.

William scoured through the remaining weapon cases with renewed, manic purpose, determined to determine what else he might need for future, inevitable encounters. Not knowing what fresh hell to anticipate, he forcibly opened the cases for a plasma-based "Vortex Rifle," a "Heavy Onslaught Automatic Rifle," and a massive "Rocket Launcher with Plasmoid Modification." Each case holding the weapons showed detailed, complex information about how to operate their exact, specialized functions. William, knowing it might not be long before more daemonsters came, ruthlessly opted to just figure it out on the fly. William Thompson was now armed for war, a walking, armored arsenal. His determination only faltered upon the jarring, static-filled sound of his radio system hissing to life.

"Thompson? Thompson? You still alive?" Taylor Hall's voice, strained and tinny, crackled over the radio.

William quickly took cover behind a reinforced weapons rack, the familiar voice a brief, welcome anchor in the chaos, to answer Hall's transmission. "I'm debating that. What's your status, Doc?"

"I made it to Hendricks's office... the old bastard has his own personal encryption on his office I'm trying to bypass," Taylor replied, his voice a tight wire of concentration, the sound of rapid, furious keying audible in the background. "But that's not the weird part... the entire executive suite... it's as if the daemonsters completely avoided it. No sign of a struggle, no blood, no scorch marks..."

William's eyes widened behind his visor in disbelief. "What?!" He cautiously stuck his head out from cover, eyes scanning the dark, weapon-strewn lab for any sign of hostiles. "What the hell are they hiding in there that's keeping them out? A goddamn force field?"

"Trust me, I want to know. You'd think everyone was just out to lunch up here... You still got that hard drive Raymond shoved into you?" Taylor

asked, a note of building, critical urgency in his voice.

"Yeah, as far as I know, it's still linked. You gonna tell me what it is, Hall? I've been waiting for the goddamn answer," William asked, gripping his new plasma rifle tightly.

"I thought I saw the software update start uploading earlier. Raymond's hard drive had the AI... SUCOR," Taylor started, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, the name sounding heavy with forgotten history.

"So why doesn't it work? Why hasn't it been active? It's been hours, Doc!" William interrupted, his impatience fraying under the stress.

"It needs remote activation. Last I heard it was highly experimental, possibly volatile. If anyone tried to activate it outside of the executive suite, it would fry the device used—a failsafe Hendricks insisted upon," Taylor explained, a clear hint of professional unease in his voice.

William became instantly worried, his armored suit suddenly feeling less like protection and more like a high-tech coffin, a metal trap ready to be

sprung. "Hall... you saying this damn thing could incinerate me?"

"Mostly your armor. You might get a few second-degree burns—smell like barbeque, no pressure!" Taylor said, a nervous, high-pitched chuckle in his voice that failed completely to hide his underlying fear.

"DOC!" William chuckled and yelled, a mix of fear, disbelief, and sheer adrenaline fueling his voice.

Taylor Hall could be heard chuckling nervously again, a dry, weary sound. "Easy Thompson, I'm just trying to survive like you are! Where are you at now, soldier?"

"Sub 6, Weapons Lab... it seems to be the general consensus that I needed more guns," William replied, adjusting the weight of the rocket launcher on his shoulder.

"At least you have that. I'm practically naked out here." A rapid series of electronic beeps could be heard over the radio from Hall's tablet, followed by a triumphant, satisfying click. "I'm in. Probably best you keep moving toward Sergeant Kelso. Hall, out."

"Stay alive, Hall," William said, his voice a distorted echo before the radio crackled into silence. He pushed himself up from the cold, blood-slicked floor of the weapons lab, the heavy, metallic tang of the air still dense around him, and strode out, his focus fixed on the next, desperate objective.

Back on Earth, thousands of miles away and a world removed from the Martian carnage, a worn-down, suburban home served as the chaotic backdrop for the conspiracy host's frantic final broadcast. He stood before it, framed by the cracked, dusty concrete of a desolate, abandoned city street under a harsh, unforgiving daytime sun. Luggage bags, bursting at the seams with supplies, and precarious stacks of cardboard boxes were haphazardly piled around him and a battered, rusty van. His phone, propped up precariously against a leaning mailbox, cast a flickering, ghostly glow on his face as he streamed from a mobile app.

Breathless and wide-eyed with a desperate, manic urgency, he wrestled a heavy box of canned goods into the back of the van, but his focus remained fixed, almost painfully, on the torrent of live comments scrolling furiously across the small

screen—a mix of support, panic, and venomous skepticism.

A flash of chestnut brown movement: his border collie, a bundle of quivering, nervous fur, darted into the van and immediately nestled beneath the seat, as if sensing the impending, monumental chaos that was about to break the world. The host swallowed hard, his voice cracking with a raw, emotional intensity that spoke of true, unshakeable belief.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the situation is about to get worse than any of us can possibly imagine. I wish I was the crackpot some of you accuse me of being..." He paused, pushing another duffel bag into the van's dark interior, his words tumbling out in a rush of air, powered by desperation. "Kill switches set by my deep-cover sources have been activated – a last-resort move only to be done if they were captured or killed. They're gone, folks."

He returned to the camera, his eyes blazing with a prophet's fire. "What I am about to say is not planned, recorded, or scripted in any way. You see me loading up these bags, you all need to do that now! Gather food, water, clothes, warm blankets,

as many loved ones as you can physically fit, and get to shelter now! Get underground! This is not a drill! This is not a test!"

The comments continued to scroll, a chaotic, unstoppable mix of paralyzing fear, desperate pleas for more information, and harsh, mocking derision.

"The most recent, verified update I received about the situation on Mars is that out of an estimated two million personnel stationed on the planet, there are only five *possible* survivors! This was maybe an hour ago, that report is already ancient history. There are multiple, confirmed reports, that you all can verify yourselves with five minutes on the internet, of anything Sol Union Corp related being surrounded by overwhelming military forces across the globe. They are locking it down. There are also confirmed reports of galactic allies—fleets—moving into various defensive and offensive positions across the system. Standard widespread evacuation plans for civilian populations are being initiated. They know it's coming here, too."

He moved away again, throwing more bags into the van, his shoulders hunched with the crushing, personal weight of the unfolding, global disaster.

"In the documents released, the ones I managed to decipher before the blackout, there were mentions of massive, localized tremors and some kind of thick, pervasive red mist before the attacks began. The reports seem rushed, many are incomplete and contradictory. I don't know what use this incredibly fragmented information will be to anyone but..." He took a deep, shuddering breath, his body trembling with the effort to remain composed, "...maybe it'll save somebody, anybody. Goodbye, everyone. God help us all." The screen went black.

Hours later, William found himself standing before one of Sol Union Corp's emergency bunkers, its formidable, steel-reinforced entrance scarred by a violent, catastrophic breach—the metal peeled back like a flower of steel. He stepped inside, the air immediately thick with the acrid scent of ozone, burnt wiring, and something dark and metallic—something exactly like blood, yet somehow fouler. The main corridor was a charnel

house, a massacre zone littered with the butchered, unrecognizable remains of Sol Union personnel and militia, a macabre tableau that stole his breath and made his stomach clench with revulsion.

A high-pitched electrical whine vibrated through the air, followed by the deafening, sharp crack of a plasma discharge. The air momentarily rippled with the dying, unholy shrieks of unseen horrors deeper inside the bunker. William charged forward, his Plasma Bladed Chainsaw humming at his side, its cold, heavy comfort a small, reliable anchor in the storm of chaos. He burst into the bunker proper, his eyes widening at the devastating scene before him.

Sergeant Kelso, impossibly, was still alive, though just barely. He was a wreck, his body pinned against a cracked, bloody wall by a piece of fallen, concrete debris, but around him lay a grim, beautiful testament to his final, heroic stand: a bloody, grotesque mosaic of Imp, Zombie, and even Pink Gorilla Shark Beast daemonster corpses. The Horde Annihilation Gun, a massive, futuristic weapon with a multi-barreled cooling system the size of a small engine, clattered to the ground

beside him, its power core depleted, smoking gently.

William rushed to Kelso's side, dropping to one knee in a pool of drying blood. "Sarge!" he choked out, his voice hoarse with relief and shock.

Kelso's breath hitched, a ragged, wet sound that rattled in his chest, a sound that spoke of broken ribs and ruptured organs. "About damn time you got here, Thompson...did Frandsen make it?"

William slowly shook his head, the memory of Frandsen's final, selfless act a fresh, agonizing wound. "He took himself off the board. The baby didn't make it, Sarge."

A grim, sorrowful understanding flickered in Kelso's pain-filled eyes, a momentary softening of his usually steel-hard gaze. "Poor bastard. Can't say I blame him." He coughed, a wet, terrible sound, then glanced at the Horde Annihilation Gun at his feet. "You looking for a 'Welcome to Mars' present, marine?"

"No, sir," William said, his gaze still fixed on the sheer, grotesque carnage surrounding the sergeant. "I'm still just processing everything. Too much has happened."

Kelso's voice was terribly weak, but a hint of a familiar, gruff pride remained, an echo of the battle-hardened marine. "You've done well for a rookie, Thompson. No wonder the Sol Union Corp brass wanted you on the move upon touchdown. They had eyes on you."

William stiffened, a cold wave of suspicion washing over him. "Sir, what do you mean they wanted me on the move? I'm just a marine."

"I told you, I read your file before you arrived on base, before all this started," Kelso rasped, his voice fading like a dying radio signal. "Someone up high must want you in bed enough to get you in the field ASAP. Or they knew this fucking Hell was coming and wanted you dead. I can't rule either out, Thompson. But they had a plan for you."

William reached for his I.F. Packs, the medical injectors tucked into his forearm armor. "Need a drink, sir? A shot of something strong? I raided some fridges in the infirmary earlier."

Kelso grunted, a sound of pain and utter resignation. "No, soldier, no. There's no point for me now." His gaze, heavy with a terrible, final resolve, drifted back to the Annihilation Gun. "That gun

there is the strongest thing the Sol Union Corp ever developed for infantry units. I'm not sure how effective all the bells and whistles are the lab rats slapped on it. But..." He coughed violently, a geyser of bright, arterial blood erupting from his lips. "If you're gonna survive this...you'll need it. You'll need every bit of it."

A familiar, icy dread settled deep in William's gut. This was it. Like with Frandsen, Kelso was working up to his dying wish, a final, impossible directive.

"If you want this gun, then your objective is clear, Thompson," Kelso continued, his voice surprisingly firm, the words coming with immense effort, each one a hammer blow. "When you leave here, you are to rip whoever started this shitstorm to shreds by any means necessary. You find the source and you burn it down. That's your mission now, marine."

"And before that?" William asked, his voice barely a whisper, the question tearing at him, already knowing the terrible answer.

Kelso's eyes, though clouded with pain and failing vision, held a chilling, final clarity, a terrifying sanity. "I need you to kill me, Thompson."

William's eyes widened behind his visor, the words striking him like a physical blow, a punch to the soul. He knelt in silence, unable to comprehend the request.

"Don't give me that look, Thompson," Kelso rasped, a faint, almost sardonic smile touching his bloody lips. "The mist...the red mist...it got to me hours ago. I've been able to fight it off, keep it from turning me, as long as I could. But looking like a mutt's chew toy, I'm out of the fight...and the last thing those fuckers need is access to that tech. I got a look at some of those bastards raiding the base. They're using gear with Sol Union Corp branding, gear that is not on any direct file. Someone here has been supplying them with weapons, William. It may be too late to stop it, but I can't take that chance. Charge up a shot with your pistol...blow my brains out, quick and clean...and the gun is yours, Marine. Complete the mission."

The weight of the impossible decision pressed heavily on William Thompson, as the narrative

shifted back to Taylor Hall's relentless pursuit, now in Dr. Hendricks's inner sanctum. Hall finally slipped into Dr. Hendricks's private office, the door clicking shut silently behind him. A lingering, profound bewilderment settled over him at the unexpected, unsettling lack of alarm systems or booby traps—the room was seemingly undefended.

The office walls were not painted or wallpapered; they were adorned with ancient, meticulously preserved Argentan stone tablets, their surfaces etched with the brutal, disturbing artistry of medieval warriors locked in a perpetual, blood-soaked battle against grotesque, hellish creatures. The engravings seemed to outline a complex, partial map to some hidden burial site or crypt, though large, frustrating sections were clearly absent, chipped away by time or malice. Stone statues of the very warriors depicted on the tablets stood silently opposite Hendricks's oversized, mahogany desk, their silent, weathered gazes fixed on some distant, unseen foe, their weapons held eternally ready. The room felt less like an office and more like an occult historian's private study.

As Taylor Hall moved toward the massive, antique-looking desk, a familiar, official photograph caught his eye. It was an early group shot of the pioneers, the eight original architects of the transdimensional expeditions, taken years ago when everything was still a grand, scientific adventure. A digital display on the frame scrolled through their names: *Dr. Taylor Hall, Dr. Gabriel Raymond, Dr. Miguel Carson, Dr. Kevin Gerard, Dr. Alicia Neurton, Dr. Melvin Bertonia, Dr. Samantha Peterson, Dr. Darren Cloud, and Dr. Samael Hendricks.* Raymond, Hall, Carson, Peterson, and Cloud beamed with youthful, scientific exuberance, full of hope and naive ambition. Guerard, Neurton, and Melvin Bertonia, however, appeared notably more somber, their expressions serious, almost grim, as if they already knew the terrible cost. Hendricks, though, was focused elsewhere, his gaze directed intensely to his left, as if sensing a familiar, malevolent presence just outside the frame.

"If only we knew then what we know now..." Taylor Hall murmured to himself, his voice a low, painful whisper, heavy with regret. He scrutinized the bleak Martian landscape in the photo's back-

drop and, in the direction of Hendricks's over-the-shoulder glance, a hazy, indistinct figure materialized out of the static of the old photo, an anomaly that shouldn't be there. It terrifyingly resembled the Hell Priest who had taken Dr. Alicia Neurton's life—Dagan—his long, bony finger extended, pointing directly at a smiling Neurton, a gesture of dark, predatory selection.

Taylor's horrified thoughts were abruptly shattered by a new voice transmission from Hendricks's computer—a recording or a live feed from Hendricks himself, the voice surprisingly clear.

"I must admit I am surprised you managed to make it this far, Dr. Hall. Your tenacity, while irritating in your youth, has always been your greatest asset."

Taylor sank heavily into the chair at Hendricks's desk, its expensive leather still warm from the last person. "Only because I knew you had some kind of private, secret contingency, Samael. You always did."

"It delights me to hear you remember the old ways," Samael Hendricks's voice crackled through the speaker, a hint of his old, dry wit, yet under-

scored by a palpable, deep urgency that was new. "But it is without saying that we are running out of time to contain this catastrophe. I've done my absolute best to decipher the Argentan tablets since your departure from the program, pouring over every glyph and fragmented prophecy. However, the whereabouts of the mythical Slayer remain desperately unclear. My ability to monitor the situation from my current station has been severely hindered, almost as if an unseen force is actively working to obscure my efforts. Tell me, old friend, where is SUCOR?"

Taylor's brow furrowed in confusion at first, the name triggering a faint, almost forgotten echo in his mind from the initial project briefings—a name banned from open conversation. Then, a flash of memory, sharp and sudden: the sleek, black hard drive Raymond had, with meticulous care and secrecy, inserted into William Thompson's armor just before his death. It was a detail so mundane at the time, yet now it felt imbued with profound, cosmic significance.

"I believe Raymond inserted it into a soldier's armor before he was killed... one of the newer, ad-

vanced models, if I recall correctly," Taylor replied, the pieces of the puzzle slowly, terrifyingly clicking into place.

Hendricks chuckled, a dry, satisfied sound that held a surprising note of triumph amidst the gravity of their situation. "Good. It was my hope, my explicit directive, that Raymond would do just that. He always did have a knack for anticipating my more clandestine directives, even when they went against established protocol."

"Would SUCOR be able to stop this, or am I wasting my time being here, risking everything for a ghost of an AI?" Taylor pressed, his voice laced with a desperate urgency, the weight of their precarious situation pressing down on him. The memory of the chaos, the screams, the relentless pursuit, fueled his impatience.

"In the hands of someone like Corporal Thompson, it will be more than enough," Hendricks replied, a clear note of unshakeable triumph in his tone, a rare crack in his usual composed demeanor. "Thompson's unique neural pathways and inherent, desperate adaptability make him the ideal conduit for SUCOR's full, devastating ca-

pabilities. Now, I'm remotely initiating SUCOR's activation sequence on my device."

A window prompt opened instantly on Hendricks's computer, seemingly of its own accord, bypassing the security Taylor had struggled with. The harsh green text against a black background was stark and unyielding. It was the familiar, complex interface of Hendricks's bespoke operating system, a digital fortress he had built with his own genius.

"I'll need you to input the exact sequences I tell you to allow full functionality. This isn't a simple plug-and-play operation; it requires a precise, almost symbiotic interaction to unleash SUCOR's true potential. I may have a plan to stop this, a final, dangerous gambit that could turn the tide of this invasion. But it will require the four of us to work together, just like the old days, Taylor."

Hall's confusion deepened, a cold knot forming in his stomach. *Four?* Who was he referring to? The last time they had operated as a quartet, it had been a lifetime ago, a different war, a different enemy, before the corporation consumed their friendships and turned them into competitors.

"I know it has been some time since we last worked together, Hall. Believe me, I miss the old days, the synergy, the shared, pure purpose," Hendricks continued, a wistful quality to his voice, a hint of genuine nostalgia softening his usually pragmatic delivery. "SUCOR has become something so much more than an advanced AI, beyond even my own initial aspirations. It has evolved, adapted, learned in ways I never fully anticipated, perhaps even beyond my control. Now... follow these exact instructions, precisely as I give them to you. Every keystroke, every command, is critical to William's survival and the success of this mission. When this is completed, when SUCOR is fully integrated, I'll direct you to a nearby, private armory to arm yourself. You're going to need every ounce of firepower you can get for what comes next."

8

No Rest Living

William's boots crunched on the scorched earth, each step a grim punctuation mark to the life he had just extinguished. Sergeant Kelso lay sprawled, a grotesque tableau after a plasma bolt had carved a clean, cauterized exit through his skull. It wasn't an act of malice, William rationalized, but an execution—a mercy born of grim necessity. The Horde Annihilation Gun, a weapon of brutal efficiency, was already secured in its specialized housing within his armor, its absence from his hands a silent testament to the deed. A heavy shroud of regret, thick as the dust swirling in the Martian wind, threatened to engulf him, a suffocating weight that pressed down with the silence of

the battlefield, a silence broken only by the distant, unsettling sounds of a world gone mad.

Suddenly, a crisp, electronic chime, unnervingly cheerful, resonated within his helmet. The sound sliced through the oppressive quiet like a laser beam. It was SUCOR, the Sol Union Corp's artificial intelligence. Its voice, a paradox of robotic precision and an almost unsettling human warmth, broke the spell of his internal turmoil.

"His fears were not misplaced, Corporal Thompson," SUCOR's voice echoed, calm and even-toned, carrying no hint of the carnage it had just witnessed. "The transformation was mere moments from consuming him. You only did what was right, a difficult but logical choice for unit preservation." The AI's clinical assessment was jarring, yet oddly comforting.

William flinched, the accusation in the AI's words, though unintended, stinging him. His head snapped up, his gaze sweeping the ruined landscape of the Sol Union Corp base as if searching for the disembodied voice's source. "Who is speaking to me?" he demanded, his own voice hoarse and strained, rasping against the dry Martian air.

"Hello, Corporal William Blazek Thompson," SUCOR replied, its voice devoid of inflection, yet somehow conveying a sense of recognition, a knowledge of his very existence. "I am SUCOR, a sentient intelligence assigned to Mars Sector 7. My core systems were remotely activated by Dr. Hall, under Dr. Hendricks' explicit instruction, following the catastrophic containment breach."

William grunted, a sound of disbelief and grudging acceptance. He took a long, agonizing moment to process the bizarre reality: he, a lone marine, was conversing with a super-intelligence, a disembodied voice in his head offering cold, hard commentary on the horrific necessity of his actions. He adjusted the grip on his empty weapon housing, the cold metal a small anchor in the storm of his mind.

"I understand you may not be in the best mental state, given the circumstances of the invasion and the loss of your squad," SUCOR continued, its tone remarkably free of judgment, almost empathetic, as if it were a seasoned therapist rather than an AI. "But I have analyzed the situation and can provide crucial intel on your remaining weapons,

your armor's current status, and the immediate environment. My primary function is to support surviving personnel. I must also add that Dr. Hendricks wishes to speak to you urgently—patching him through your suit's comm system now."

A faint click, then a series of static bursts, and another voice, crackled into William's ear. It was familiar, a voice he recognized from pre-mission briefings, the architect of the ill-fated experiment, but now tinged with a profound weariness he hadn't noticed before, a subtle tremor that hinted at profound stress and perhaps guilt. "Corporal William Blazek Thompson," the voice began, its cadence precise despite the underlying fatigue. "I have been monitoring your progress for a while and commend your combat effectiveness. Though, it appears I also must apologize for the immense sacrifices you were forced to make in order to stay alive and the terrible burden we have placed upon you."

William remained silent, his jaw tight, his helmet optics reflecting the desolate scene. Impatience, a hot coal of quiet fury, simmered beneath

the surface of his outward calm. He had no desire for hollow apologies, only answers. Answers to the *why* and the *how* of the cataclysmic invasion that had swallowed his squad and his world.

"Understood," Hendricks conceded, the weariness in his voice deepening, acknowledging William's palpable anger. "I won't waste time with minor pleasantries or self-pity. Based on the real-time information I'm receiving from the monitoring systems still barely functioning around the base, it appears you and Dr. Hall are the only ones still alive. The rest of the research and security teams have been... compromised."

Slowly, deliberately, William stepped out of the ravaged command bunker, the metallic scent of burnt electronics and blood thick in the air. The desolate landscape stretched before him, a vista of destruction littered with the scattered, broken forms of those who had not been as fortunate—corpses of both humans and the grotesque creatures that had killed them. His silence deepened, a grim acceptance of the harsh, terrible reality. Within him, a slow, insistent heat began to build—his blood beginning to boil, not with

mindless rage, but with a growing, cold certainty that something profoundly, criminally wrong had transpired here, orchestrated by human hands.

"Our work into exploring other dimensions, into harnessing the power of the Void, was initially conceived for the betterment of mankind—to find new resources, to build better technologies, to open a new chapter for humanity," Hendricks' voice was strained, each word a struggle, a confession. "I had long feared something of this magnitude would go wrong. I assigned a successor, Dr. Guerard, who seemed to share the same aspirations for the betterment of mankind to take over the day-to-day operations. It breaks my heart to acknowledge that she was manipulated, twisted by forces even beyond our comprehension. But the time for remorse and regrets must be short-lived, Corporal, as I fear the situation will only progress and escalate if the four of us—you, myself, Dr. Hall, and SUCOR—do not work together, immediately, and without fail!" The last words were almost a plea, tinged with a desperate urgency that was chillingly genuine.

SUCOR chimed in, its voice cutting through Hendricks' monologue, urgent and sharp, introducing a new, terrifying data point. "Sir, anomalous energy readings throughout the Sol System indicate massive temporal disturbances in range of Earth. The Hellgates are opening on a planetary scale."

Hendricks' voice, now raw with desperation, returned, the professional facade completely stripped away. "Corporal, even if you must see me as the villain of this story, the man who opened the door, I beg of you to listen to the objective. The invasion is not confined to Mars. It is heading for Earth. We are past the point of damage control; this is a scramble for survival." The weight of those words hung in the air, a terrifying, absolute prophecy of doom.

William's fists clenched inside his gauntlets, the grip of his plasma pistol's hilt, still secured in its holster, groaning under the pressure of his suppressed rage. The recent Martian invasion, a sudden, brutal onslaught of daemonsters unlike anything humanity had ever encountered, had left him with a singular, burning desire for vengeance,

a need to inflict proportional retribution. "What's the objective, Hendricks? Cut the philosophy and give me a target," he demanded, his voice a low growl through the comms.

His helmet navigation updated instantly, a new waypoint flashing green against the holographic display of his HUD, a marker over a distant structure. "You'll need to access the main teleportation bays in Delta Labs. It is here, at the epicenter of the experiment, that I believe the daemonsters were initially granted full, stable entrance to this world. From there, SUCOR will be able to reroute the teleportation sequence to a secure, uncharted location—the Deimos Classified Operations sector. SUCOR will direct you how to deploy the necessary spectral tracing drones to pinpoint the exact origin and nature of the invaders. This will provide the critical information we need to coordinate an effective counter-strike. Members of the Armored Terran Resistance are already on standby, preparing for the inevitable assault on Earth." The voice, calm and authoritative, cutting through the panic, suddenly belonged to General Kael, a grizzled veteran whose face was etched with the weight of

countless battles against threats both alien and internal.

William mounted his pistol to the front of his armor, securing it with a magnetic lock, and with a practiced, fluid motion, summoned the Heavy Plasma Rifle into his hand from his back-mounted housing. The weapon hummed with latent energy, its cold, solid metal a comforting, lethal weight.

"They will know you're coming, Corporal. There is no element of surprise left," Kael continued. "SUCOR will provide unparalleled support, unlimited access to all necessary intel the Sol Union Corp has to offer, and so much more—including experimental ordnance. I believe you might be fond of what we have to offer. Taylor Hall, who is already on the move, will meet you there. He has his own mission to complete." The transmission clicked off, leaving William in the eerie silence of the blasted Martian landscape. He swallowed, the name Taylor Hall sparking a flicker of something almost akin to professional hope in his chest; Hall was a brilliant engineer, a survivor.

William's breath hitched, the silence of the desolate base thick and heavy as the transmission died.

Unbeknownst to the Martian survivors, a far grimmer reality, the main event, was unfolding back on the blue sphere of Earth. The invasion on Mars, horrifying as it was, was merely a prelude, a costly diversion to mask a much more insidious, well-coordinated threat brewing closer to home, a threat that had infiltrated the highest levels of the Sol Union Corp.-----Dust motes danced in the lone, weak beam of a flashlight, illuminating the makeshift sanctuary. The air, thick with the scent of damp concrete, ancient dust, and desperation, offered a stark, primitive contrast to the sterile, technologically advanced world outside.

The Conspiracy Host, a man whose life had been dedicated to unearthing hidden truths and disseminating classified information, had sought refuge in this forgotten, sub-level bomb shelter, a relic from a century past. His meager belongings were stacked neatly along the grimy walls, a chaotic testament to his hurried flight: journals overflowing with frantic, scribbled notes; a battered, antique-looking laptop; and an array of antiquated radio equipment—his only means of punching through the official silence. At his feet, his loyal

dog, a scruffy terrier named Buster, whimpered and barked, its fur bristling, its small body quivering as if sensing a profound, malevolent presence the man could not yet perceive. The Host, however, was oblivious to his companion's distress, his attention wholly consumed by the intricate web of wires and antennae he was painstakingly connecting. Sweat beaded on his forehead as he meticulously checked each connection, his fingers trembling slightly with a mixture of excitement and fear. He was building a communications hub, a desperate, final attempt to cut through the deafening, state-mandated cacophony of a world teetering on the brink of utter, final chaos.

Finally, a sharp crackle—a sign of success. The first radio sputtered to life, emitting a stern, authoritative voice, laced with heavy static. “Ladies and Gentlemen, the following is an emergency broadcast brought to you from the unified command of the Armored Terran Resistance. This is not a test. We are collaborating with military and law enforcement across multiple jurisdictions to evacuate regions near known Sol Union Corp facilities, as these are considered primary targets.

Please be advised to follow evacuation orders immediately to the nearest designated shelters to your location. This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill."

The broadcast fractured violently, the voice instantly replaced by a deafening symphony of high-pitched screeches and relentless static, a discordant, maddening chorus that seemed to tear at the very fabric of the air, a sound not of this dimension. Then, a new voice, deep, smooth, and chillingly resonant, cut directly through the noise, a voice that seemed to slither into the listener's mind and freeze the blood in their veins. It was silky, almost hypnotic, yet carried an undeniable undercurrent of chilling authority and boundless power.

"Good evening, people of Earth. My name is Dr. Guerard of the Sol Union Corp, Head of Applied Inter-dimensional Physics. But you may call me Kronos. For some time now, my dedicated partners within the Sol Union Corp and I have collaborated with miraculous, evolved beings from beyond mortal comprehension. We exchanged technology, we exchanged knowledge, and to-

gether we have forged a new, magnificent path for all mankind; a path across the cosmos to a greater destiny. You may *think* you comprehend the truth of your reality; but know this, your outdated concept of human evolution is about to violently unfold..."

The broadcast had spread like a virulent plague, an unstoppable infection, overriding every known terrestrial and orbital frequency. Across the globe, broadcast screens, once ablaze with the vibrant, incessant advertisements of a hyper-modern, technologically saturated world, had been hijacked. Now, every towering digital display in every metropolis, every personal device clutched in trembling hands, showed the same chilling, inescapable image: Kronos. He stood alone in a vast, empty white room, perfectly still, his skin unnaturally pale, almost luminous, his eyes dark, bottomless pits that seemed to absorb all surrounding light. An aura of pure, cold menace radiated from him, a tangible, suffocating presence that made the very air crackle with unnatural energy. Initially, the bustling crowds of Times Square in 2145 paid little mind, accustomed to digital intrusions and advertising stunts. But

then, even the omnipresent holographic advertisements for luxury stores and hyper-cars, usually impervious to external interference, flickered and died, replaced entirely by the unblinking, unsettling gaze of Dr. Guerard. A ripple of profound unease spread through the futuristic cityscape, a collective, visceral shiver that began in the pit of every stomach. The jovial, indifferent chatter died down, replaced by murmurs of confusion, growing panic, and finally, abject fear.

"You may think we are daemonsters, or morally challenged, simple devils," Kronos continued, his voice resonating with false benevolence, "but we are here, truly, to help you guide the way to your next form. Give yourselves over, freely; body, blood, and soul; and become something far greater than your wildest, most limited imaginations. The new world, the new humanity, begins now..." His voice, still calm, held an insidious, terrifying promise, a siren song of total, horrifying transformation that promised transcendence through annihilation.

A new, overwhelming wave of debilitating screeches ripped through the air, this time feeling

like they were tearing at the very fabric of reality itself. They were not merely sounds but a physical assault, vibrating through bone and muscle, causing internal pain. On the screens, a horrifying, sickening transformation began. Kronos's pale skin bubbled and melted, peeling away like discarded tissue to reveal the horrifying, skeletal monstrosity beneath—a towering, chitinous figure. His eyes, already abyssal, receded further into cavernous, smoking sockets, and his human features contorted into a macabre, inhuman rictus of pain and savage ecstasy. His voice deepened, a guttural, wet roar that was no longer human, distorted by the agony of metamorphosis into something alien and terrible.

"...when your souls *burn*!" The final word was a raw, primal scream of a predator, and the image on the screens flickered one last time before dying into absolute blackness, leaving behind a lingering afterimage of unspeakable horror in the minds of billions.-----The piercing screeches resonated within the concrete confines of the bomb shelter, a physical, intolerable assault on the Conspiracy Host's eardrums. Blood trickled from his ears, warm and

viscous, the sound a torment he could not escape, a persistent, gnawing echo that threatened to drive him mad. In a frantic, desperate surge of adrenaline, fueled by pure terror, he lashed out, smashing his radio equipment against the unforgiving concrete floor. Wires sparked, plastic shattered, but the sound, though dulled, persisted, echoing in the confined space, bouncing off the grimy walls.

In the chaos, a small, faded photograph tumbled from his satchel, dislodged by the violent impact. It was an old picture, creased with age and soaked with his sweat and blood, the edges softened by countless touches, a familiar, bold signature scrawled across the bottom: "Arthur Thompson." The Conspiracy Host's blood-soaked hands fumbled for it, his eyes widening in a flash of recognition and anguish as he clutched the precious relic to his chest. As he clutched the photo, a sob tore from his throat, raw and uncontrolled, a sound of profound grief, fear, and despair, an expression of a broken hero worship.

“I always wanted to be just like you, Artie. I wanted to tell people the truth about what’s really going on, to expose the lies. You were my hero, ever

since I learned about your fight against the establishment in school. How did you do it? How did you keep fighting?" His words, thick with grief and desperation, were barely audible over the ringing in his ears, overshadowed by the phantom screeches. Blood still streamed, warm and sticky, down his neck, soaking into the collar of his worn, makeshift shirt. Suddenly, a sharp, searing pain lanced through his chest, a blinding agony that stole his breath. He gasped, his eyes wide with a sudden, dawning terror, clutching his chest, and then collapsed to the cold floor, the photograph still clutched tightly in his hand. The overwhelming wave of emotions, the crushing, final fear, the sudden, unbearable noise—it had all culminated in this final, silent act. A massive heart attack.

His dog, Buster, whined, a mournful, distressed sound, a desperate, futile attempt at canine CPR against a world facing the unimaginable horrors that had first impacted Mars, horrors that were now violently and definitively unfolding on Earth. Buster nudged his master's still form with his wet nose, whimpering, his small body trembling with helpless sorrow.

Hoping to prevent Earth from facing this nightmare alone, William marched through the darkened corridor of the Sol Union Corp facility, the rhythmic thump of his armored boots echoing in the oppressive, metallic silence. The air here was heavy with the metallic tang of blood and the sickly sweet, cloying scent of something indescribably foul—the smell of Hellfire and burnt flesh. He stopped, pressing himself against the cold metal wall, his senses on high alert, his HUD filtering the noise, as the guttural growls of daemonsters and the sickening tearing of flesh reached his ears from further down the corridor. He pulled out the Vortex Rifle, its scope illuminating a grotesque scene: nightmarish, bipedal creatures, their bodies contorted and grotesque, and the zombified, cannibalistic remains of what were once humans, feasting on fresh remains, their movements jerky and unnatural. The corridor was a charnel house, a bloody testament to the brutal efficiency of the invasion.

Inside his HUD, a critical text message from SUCOR flashed: "Sir, your Vortex Rifle may produce too much of an audio disturbance for you to

safely execute a stealth takedown. Consider a blade or silenced plasma weapon." William grinned, a dangerous, predatory glint in his eye, ignoring the AI's caution. "Good..." he whispered, his voice a low, excited rasp.

He opened fire, the rifle's roar tearing through the corridor, obliterating many of the daemonsters before they even registered his presence, the muzzle flash momentarily blinding. The remaining horde, maddened by the sound and the scent of death, charged, a tidal wave of snapping teeth and chitinous claws. William unleashed his chainsaw, its teeth snarling to life with a mechanical roar, and met them head-on. The fight was a blur of movement and violence, a chaotic dance of death. He dodged, weaved, and struck, using the cramped environment to his advantage. The long-range Vortex Rifle gave way to the close-quarters chainsaw, then the Heavy Plasma Rifle for concentrated bursts, and finally, jagged shards of metal from destroyed machinery used as makeshift weapons. It was a grotesque, primal ballet of survival. When the last daemonster fell, William stood victorious, adren-

aline surging through his veins, his entire body drenched in alien blood and gore.

"More daemonsteric signatures are closing fast," SUCOR chimed, a clinical, detached voice in the chaos, utterly unphased. William grinned, a feral light in his eyes. He quickly gathered stationary proximity grenades, placing them along the walls and floor, arming them with practiced, military ease. He turned and ran down the corridor, the sounds of an approaching swarm growing louder, their roars shaking the metal floor. The grenades detonated in a series of concussive blasts, tearing through the pursuing horde, slowing them down but not stopping them.

William moved faster, a figure of unstoppable momentum, the world viewed through the brutal, utilitarian lens of his helmet camera. In a brutal, first-person perspective, he carved a path through endless enemies, pushing through the pain of countless, accumulating injuries. Then, he was confronted by a new, massive nightmare: a Halgardian Goliath. Massive, muscular, with legs inverted like a goat's and skin like iron, this beast shrugged off a barrage of William's standard attacks. The

Halgardian Goliath, with a speed that defied its size, grabbed William by the leg and slammed him into the ceiling with bone-jarring force, the sickening crack of his tibia echoing in the corridor. William was stunned, his face a bruised and bloody mask, his vision swimming with static.

SUCOR chimed in, its voice laced with a sudden, rare urgency. “Corporal Thompson. Activating Berserker Protocols now. System override initiated.” A thick, luminous substance surged into William’s bloodstream from injectors embedded in his armor's life support system. His superficial wounds healed almost instantly, knitting flesh and sealing lacerations, and his eyes began to glow with a dark, malevolent red light visible even through his helmet's visor. William felt the charge, a rush of pure, raw power, a menacing, savage grin spreading across his face as the bones in his leg snapped back into place with a sickening pop that he barely registered. He stood, reborn, an avatar of brutal, focused destruction. The Halgardian Goliath roared its challenge and charged again, its massive fists raised.

William met it in brutal, unflinching hand-to-hand combat, tearing at its thick flesh, ripping chunks from its massive form with bare hands. He kicked in its goat-like legs, snapping them with a sickening crunch that grounded the monster. With one final, swift motion, William gripped the Halgardian Goliath's skull and, with a terrifying surge of strength, ripped it clean off its shoulders and tossed it aside like a piece of refuse. The creature's body collapsed, a heap of dead muscle and sinew, its blood steaming on the cold metal floor. William stared at his hands, which were shaking not from fear, but from the residual power coursing through them.

"SUCOR?" William's voice was a confused, almost reverent rasp. "What did you do to me? What was that?"

SUCOR chimed in, its voice calm, clinical, and informative once more. "I activated an experimental procedure designed to assist soldiers in overwhelming combat scenarios. With it, your physical abilities are pushed beyond the maximum human potential, and any wounds sustained will be healed almost instantly by nanite application. The charge

can be overpowering, making it so you hardly feel any pain, only an intense focus and energy."

"It feels... good..." William whispered, a strange, dark satisfaction, an almost euphoric rush, in his voice. The power was intoxicating.

"Sir, we are almost to the Delta Labs. Despite the efficacy of the Berserker Protocol, we must hurry to prevent the Earth invasion from reaching its maximum threshold."

William, fueled by the raw, intoxicating power of the Berserker Protocols, a blood-soaked harbinger of vengeance and death, sprinted towards the distant Delta Labs, a new, terrible force unleashed upon the demonic invasion.

Inside the Delta Labs, Taylor Hall, clad in a sleek, specialized tactical armor and armed with a highly modified Combat Shotgun, arrived moments later. He was visibly shaken, the recent combat leaving him on edge and jumpy. The sudden flicker of the facility's emergency lights made him jump, and he instinctively opened fire, a reflex honed by terror. Plasma rounds, fired from his Combat Shotgun, exploded on contact with the air, some clinging to the empty space before deto-

nating, eliciting a chilling, high-pitched screech. It was the sound of a Pink Gorilla Shark Beast daemonster—a creature known for its terrifying ferocity and ability to cloak itself. Taylor's gaze locked onto the source, watching as the lights warped and shimmered, revealing the true nature of his stalker: a Spectre, a Pink Gorilla Shark Beast daemonster cloaked in perfect camouflage.

"I thought you were a ghost story, a myth," Taylor choked out, his voice laced with pure, unadulterated fear.

The Spectre roared and charged, a silent blur of muscle and rage. Taylor dodged the first swipe, channeling maximum power into his Combat Shotgun, launching a massive, concussive plasma charge. It stuck to the creature's chest, its power source overloading, exploding on impact and obliterating the Spectre in a blinding flash of light and gore. Taylor froze, staring at the shotgun in disbelief, his hands trembling. "You really did it, Carmack," he murmured, his voice still shaky, a reference to the engineer who designed the weapon.

Composing himself with a conscious effort, Taylor began to systematically search the Delta Labs for the spectral tracing drones Dr. Hendricks had mentioned in his urgent plan. The growing sounds of approaching daemonsters, and the distant, inhuman roars of William, spurred him on. He jumped again as more gunshots and primal roars echoed through the facility, too frightened to risk encountering the source, whether friend or foe. He bolted for the main teleporter bay.

Outside Delta Labs, William was revealed to be the source of the ruckus that had spooked Taylor. The Berserker Protocols still coursed through his veins, allowing him to physically obliterate Imps and Hell Knights in savage hand-to-hand combat, their forms reduced to pulpy messes. He pinned the last charging Halgardian Goliath, shoved the barrel of his Rocket Launcher into its gut, and blew it apart with a deafening roar.

"Any more mutated fuckers want some?!" William roared into the comms, his voice distorted by the berserker rage, a monstrous challenge to the horde.

A momentary, heavy silence fell over the sector, allowing William to notice the deep power fluctuations emanating from the Delta Labs' teleporters.

"Sir, it appears Dr. Hall has already entered the teleporter!" SUCOR's voice crackled, surprised.

"What?!" William exclaimed, the rage draining slightly, replaced by confusion. "I thought *you* had to reroute it first!"

"It appears the overwhelming electromagnetic disturbances from the invaders, and perhaps a residual override from Dr. Hall's prior access, have interfered with the initialization sequence after Dr. Guerard's assumed death," SUCOR replied, its logical analysis immediate. "My sensors indicate that Dr. Hall is still alive, but has been deposited in an unmarked, non-sequential sector of the Deimos Classified Operations base. Records indicate this was meant to be a storage expansion for highly volatile artifacts still located within the Delta Labs after the operations were shut down years ago."

William struggled to process SUCOR's words amidst the silence. "So why was this specific sector shut down?" he asked, his confusion growing.

"Suspicions of misuse of funds, numerous research subjects suffering violent and psychotic breaks during experimentation proceedings, and inappropriate conduct on behalf of the lead scientist, Melvin Bertonia," SUCOR listed, the reasons chillingly human.

"What 'inappropriate conduct'?" William pressed, a terrible premonition settling in his gut.

"I'm afraid the official, public records have been completely wiped from the Sol Union Corp servers. However, I was able to locate detailed incident reports of sexual misconduct between a high-ranking scientist, Malcolm, and a female colleague, Alicia, filed by Dr. Guerard. I also found records of similar accusations filed by a Dr. Jarrod Jensen against the same Malcolm; after which Jensen seemed to inexplicably disappear from all records."

A chilling realization began to dawn on William as he connected the scattered, ugly fragments of information, painting a grim, human picture behind the demonic invasion. "SUCOR... there's a love triangle, a power play, isn't there? This whole nightmare started over jealousy and corporate corruption," he posited, the words a

stark, sickening contrast to the burgeoning horror of their current situation.

Before SUCOR, the ever-present AI, could formulate a reply, William's radio crackled to life with an urgent, static-laced chime. It was Taylor Hall, his voice flat and detached, yet unmistakably alive. "Thompson? Thompson? Can you read me? Say your status." Taylor's monotone delivery, devoid of his usual nervous energy, sent a shiver down William's spine.

"Hall? Are you alright? What did you find?" William demanded, a knot of dread tightening in his stomach.

"I think you need to see what's over here. You have to," Taylor gagged, the sound of his struggle to control a visceral reaction echoing through the comms. "I think I'm gonna be sick. This isn't just a lab, Thompson."

SUCOR's calm, synthesized voice cut through the tense silence, offering a terrifying inventory. "The teleporter is still routed to Dr. Hall's last known location. I have checked the inventory data for the Delta Labs to find that the necessary spectral tracing drones Dr. Hendricks spoke of are, in-

deed, in the Deimos facility. There also appears to be numerous items associated with ritualistic sacrifice and arcane study among the stored artifacts..."

Taylor could be heard shaking violently over the radio, SUCOR's clinical assessment of the grotesque discoveries clearly affecting him more than the fight. "That's not all... I'm gonna investigate further, but I can't hold this down. Get here quick. Now." The urgency in his voice was palpable, overriding his earlier shock, replaced by a terrible resolve.

William scanned his surroundings with a practiced eye as he moved purposefully towards the teleporter bay. A gruesome sight met him: a severed torso, obscenely jammed in the frame, partially blocked a sliding glass door leading to the bay. He forced the door open with a grunt, his suspicions solidifying into certainty as he saw the activated teleporter humming with an ominous, sickly purple energy.

"Thompson... before you step through. You should know something," Taylor's voice returned, laced with a profound, sudden remorse.

"What is it, Hall? Just tell me," William demanded, his patience wearing thin in the face of the mounting horrors and the ticking clock of the Earth invasion.

"The real reason I was sent to this base. The reason I was assigned to work with Hendricks and Guerard. I was part of the initial expedition teams *into* Hell itself," Taylor confessed, his voice barely a whisper, burdened by a terrible, long-held secret.

William paused, the weight of Taylor's admission momentarily immobilizing him at the threshold. *He knew what we were dealing with all along.*

"I worked with Hendricks and the others... I helped build the tech that did this. I did this, William..." Taylor continued, the self-recrimination heavy and genuine in his tone.

"Hall, don't do that to yourself. You were a soldier, an engineer. You didn't know the corruption behind it, what they were truly aiming for," William countered, attempting to offer a semblance of comfort and absolution amidst the escalating chaos.

"The things I've seen over there still give me nightmares. I knew something was going to go

wrong the second we opened that gate. I just didn't know *how* wrong." The raw pain in Taylor's voice was unmistakable.

William gripped his Rocket Launcher tighter, the cold metal a familiar, deadly comfort against his palm. "Don't move. Don't touch anything else. I'm coming for you," he said, his voice stern, leaving no room for argument or self-pity.

As if sensing the fragility of Taylor's mindset, and providing the necessary order, SUCOR displayed a final, critical text message on William's HUD: "William, the teleporter is stable. It will take you directly to Dr. Hall's point of entry. Proceed with extreme caution." The AI's efficiency was chillingly detached.

William stood before the shimmering portal, a vortex of unknown, lethal dangers, acutely aware that these very passages, born of human greed and folly, had served as the gateways for the daemonsters. He hesitated, a fleeting, millisecond-long moment of doubt gnawing at him.

"Thompson! It's the mist! The damn soul mist!" Taylor screamed over the radio, his voice

suddenly frantic and filled with absolute terror, the sound cutting off abruptly.

A powerful surge of chaotic energy overtook William from behind, an irresistible, unseen force pushing him forward, through the luminous, sickly purple threshold of the teleporter, into the unknown, unmarked, and almost certainly hellish sector of the Deimos Classified Operations base.

9

Shores of Hellgard

William materialized in the heart of the Lazarus Ritual Chamber, a space that defied all sanity. The chamber pulsed with a horrific, violent orange light, a sickly glow cast by the immense, archaic occult symbols—cauterized deep into the very bedrock of the walls like ancient, suppurating wounds. The air was a thick, cloying miasma, heavy with the stench of ozone and old, congealed blood, metallic and sickening. His gaze, trained for immediate threat assessment, snagged on the central, terrifying feature: a cold, black stone sacrificial table. It was horrifyingly and undeniably stained—a dark, obsidian canvas bearing a grotesque tapestry of dried, slick, and fresh crimson, a silent testament to the numerous, brutal

lives taken in this unholy place. The evidence was irrefutable.

His attention was brutally ripped away by a nearby, flickering video display, its low-resolution feed showing a spectacle of pure, desperate depravity. A grotesque ritual was in progress—Melvin Bertonia and Alicia Neurton, locked in a frantic, almost desperate carnal embrace. Their bodies writhed, oblivious to the monstrous act they were a part of. Over their oblivious, coupling forms, Kevin Gerard stood, a figure of cold malice, pouring collected, viscous blood from a crystal chalice onto them. It was a vile, unholy communion, a blasphemous act of dark summoning. Yet, even this profound spectacle of corruption could not hold William's singular focus. His one, burning imperative was a singular name: Taylor Hall.

"Hall! Hall! Where are you?" he called into his helmet radio, his voice a strained, desperate whisper immediately swallowed by the oppressive, unsettling silence of the room. He moved with a heavy, purposeful stride, navigating what SUCOR's database chillingly designated as the Lazarus Ritual Room. His heavy, armored boots

crushed on scattered, brittle fragments—calcified human remains, bone shards that cracked under the weight of his resolve. “Hall! Respond!” he shouted, the sound cracking with the desperation that now felt like acid burning in his throat.

A cool, synthesized voice, utterly devoid of emotion, sliced through the mounting tension in his comms. It was SUCOR, the Sol Union Corp's highly efficient A.I. companion. “Sir, Dr. Hall’s vitals indicate an inevitable transformation. Daemonsteric signature rising precipitously.”

William’s jaw clenched, the muscles working in silent, cold fury beneath the plating of his helmet. He clutched his Heavy Onslaught Automatic Rifle, the familiar, comforting, and immense weight of the plasma weapon a tangible reassurance against the cold dread pooling in his stomach. He propelled himself forward into the metallic corridor, his resolve a grim, unyielding wall against the surging tide of his own fear. "Mark his last known location on my HUD," he growled, the command a low, vibrating resonance in his throat. SUCOR complied instantly, a bright, insistent beacon materializing on his display, pointing towards Hall’s last

known position near another shimmering, unstable teleportation bay.

He moved with a hunter's single-minded purpose through the sterile, yet utterly macabre, facility. He paid no mind to the grotesque museum that lined the corridor walls, a silent, sickening tapestry of the invasion's spoils. The steel walls were adorned with the petrified forms of daemonsteric creatures, the shattered, useless remnants of Hellish weaponry, and ancient, forbidden arms that pulsed with a faint, residual energy. Fallen soldiers and unfortunate scientists were now part of the installation's macabre decor. William ignored it all, a man driven by a singular, consuming mission. He entered a desolate conference room, his gaze briefly snagging on the empty chair where Alicia Neurton had performed her heinous betrayal—a chilling, stark reminder of the treachery that had brought them all to this. His relentless push continued, the teleportation bay his sole, burning focus.

The air in the Sol Union Corp's highly classified operations facility on Mars' moon, Deimos, hummed with a low, potent thrum of interdimensional energy as William finally stepped into the

confines of the teleportation bay. His quick, searching eyes scanned his surroundings, the familiar metallic surfaces distorted by the instability of the energy. As he approached the opened, shimmering portal, his gaze dropped to the metallic floor. There, scrawled in thick, drying blood, was a chilling, defiant, final message Alicia had left behind: "They promised me so much."

"Alicia was beyond saving..." SUCOR's synthesized voice echoed in the enclosed, tense space, a mournful, almost human whisper of regret, a rarity for the clinical AI.William huffed, a deep, primal premonition of imminent, brutal battle making the hair on his neck prickle. His expectation was immediately and violently met by a massive, earth-shaking guttural growl that vibrated through the very floor plates, followed instantly by the heavy, unmistakable tremor of a giant's foot slamming into the metal.

"Preparing Berserker Protocol supplemental injections," SUCOR announced, its tone now stripped of its sorrow and laced with a cold, clinical urgency.

William spun, his gaze falling upon tattered, tragically familiar clothes strewn haphazardly about, ripped as if by something impossibly immense from within. Further, heavier tremors approached from behind him, the rhythmic, heavy *thud-thud-thud* of massive goat legs against the ground growing louder, more insistent, and closer. William spun to face the source, his eyes widening first in sheer horror, then settling into a grim, battle-ready recognition. He was greeted by an absolute Brute Daemon of Hell—a grotesque, towering behemoth. It possessed massive, fur-lined goat legs, bulging, unsettlingly pink muscular skin stretched taut over its frame, and a head that seemed molded around a monstrous hippo's skull, adorned with formidable, jagged horns. A single, pathetic shred of a Sol Union Corp uniform, clinging precariously to the creature's massive shoulder, bore a name tag: *Taylor Hall*.

The creature swung its arm, a monstrous, club-like appendage of muscle and bone, towards William. He dodged with a swift, almost supernatural leap that defied gravity, the motion more instinct than thought. Even as he evaded the deadly,

crushing swing, he opened fire with his Heavy Onslaught Automatic Rifle. A barrage of incandescent plasmoid missiles erupted from the weapon, a blinding, continuous stream of energized white-hot death, yet they seemed to barely scratch the impossibly thick, rubbery hide of the colossal Brute Daemon. The creature, instead of being stunned, seemed utterly invigorated by the assault, lunging with terrifying, impossible speed towards William. In a desperate, acrobatic leap, William snapped one of its massive horns clean off with a sickening *crack* and, with a guttural, battle-crazed roar that echoed his grief, plunged the shard deep into the creature's colossal leg.

The Brute Daemon roared, a sound of pure, incandescent agony and white-hot rage that vibrated through William's armor, its emerald green eyes blazing with fury and pain. It began to charge a potent green energy blast in its massive, balled fist, the air around it crackling and ionizing with raw, unholy power. It launched the devastating blast towards William. William dodged again, a hair's breadth escape. The energy strike hit a crucial cooling system for the teleporter with catastrophic

force, causing a violent, system-wide disruption. Warning systems throughout the Deimos facility flared immediately to life, bathing the entire area in a chaotic, strobing red light, illuminating the deadly dance of predator and prey in stark, terrifying relief.

"Teleportation stabilizers overloaded," SUCOR reported, its voice now laced with an unmistakable, dire urgency. The battle had become a race against the facility's imminent self-destruction.

William, seizing this precious, fleeting opportunity, lunged at the Brute Daemon's monstrous head, attempting to snap its neck and end the tragic threat of his former comrade. But the Brute Daemon retaliated with a brutal, instinctual counter, gripping William in its massive, vise-like hand and hurling him with impossible, agonizing force through the malfunctioning, unstable teleporter. Behind him, the facility's control systems overloaded entirely, sparking, crashing, and exploding in a deafening symphony of destruction around the confused and injured Brute Daemon, leaving the tragic creature to its fate as the entire facility tore itself apart around it.

Moments later, the silent, terrifying black expanse of space provided the backdrop to a final, horrifying cosmic event. The entirety of the Martian moon Deimos was visible, bathed in the sickly light of a phenomenon that should not be. A massive, swirling red portal, a gaping, rotational maw of raw energy, tore open in the void and began to consume the moon piece by piece, its gravitational and dimensional pull irresistible and absolute. Soon, the moon vanished without a trace, leaving only the silent, gaping void in its wake, a stark, terrifying reminder of the chaotic, hellish forces that had been unleashed.Chapter 2: Helgard

William awakened with a gasping, ragged breath in a dark, barely illuminated cavern, the air heavy and hot, as if infernal flames were nearby—the atmosphere thick with the oppressive sound of muffled, distant screams. He pushed himself to his feet, every muscle protesting, taking in the alien, oppressive surroundings. "Where am I?" he growled, his voice rough and laced with pain, the world swimming from the impact.

A voice, cold, analytical, and familiar, answered immediately, a sliver of sanity in the chaos. “This

was the last known destination set for the exploratory expeditions into the Hell dimension, also known in ancient texts as Helgard."

The memory of the transformed creature, of Taylor Hall's final horror, surged back with sickening clarity.

"That creature is known as a Brute Daemon of Hell," the voice continued, providing clinical context to his fresh grief. "It is unusual for them to be seen outside of Hell, but my records also do not indicate a sudden, rapid transformation into one was possible."

William's emotions surged, a tidal wave of grief and pure, righteous fury. He slammed his armored fist into the side of the cave wall, a need to lash out overwhelming him. "He didn't deserve this... no one did!" he screamed, striking the wall harder and harder, venting the profound pain of losing his last human connection in this relentless, bloody conflict. He was angry, deeply hurt, wishing desperately he could somehow save Taylor, Thomas, Marianne, and everyone else lost and corrupted by the invasion.

The wall finally gave way, collapsing into dust and rock with a grinding noise, revealing the severed, pristine head of Alicia Neurton as it rolled in front of him, stopping with a gentle *thud* at his boot. Her expression was a frozen rictus of terror. "Who the hell is that?" William demanded, his heart pounding a frantic rhythm of shock and disbelief.

"That is Alicia Neurton, or what remains of her," the voice responded with brutal, detached honesty. "Forensic analysis indicates she was killed moments ago by a Hell Priest, likely a consequence of her failed pact."

William, without thinking, picked up the severed head. Alicia's expression was frozen in the final, terrifying moment she was killed. William squeezed the head in a spasm of uncontrollable, surging rage, his eyes bulging as the fragile skull audibly broke and shattered within his powered gauntlet. He hurled the broken, gruesome remains away.

Faint, chilling screeches of daemonsters echoed through the cavern winds. William quickly searched the ground, finding and securing his

Heavy Onslaught Automatic Rifle. He started to move forward with renewed, grim purpose. Hieroglyphs depicting ancient battles between the legendary Night Sentinels and giant, colossal creatures adorned the cavern walls. Inside William's HUD, a small display showed a series of red dots beginning to multiply rapidly.

"I am detecting multiple daemonsteric signatures in this sector," SUCOR stated, an undercurrent of concern in its clinical tone. "May I suggest using the Horde Annihilation Gun-9000? Its raw power output is best suited for clearing large concentrations of hostiles."Chapter 3: The Cyberdaemonster's Awakening

Later, William emerged from the confines of the cavern into a vast, open area of Hell itself. The landscape was seemingly made of solid, jagged obsidian, stretching into a smoky horizon, and the air was thick, heavy, and orange with the inescapable, nauseating smell of rotting flesh and sulfur. William looked around, the roars of rapidly approaching daemonsters echoing from all sides, a choir of imminent death.

"I am detecting a temporal distortion," SUCOR announced, its tone shifting to one of scientific observation, attempting to mask the danger. "The Horde Annihilation Gun-9000 has an experimental feature which will allow it to absorb ambient Hell energy. Be advised, the resulting blast will produce a massive recoil and may temporarily render the electrical functions of your suit inoperable."

William froze as the roar of a massive creature rattled the very air and a stream of scalding, black fire rained down from the dark, swirling sky. As he faced the source of the flames, William spotted a massive skeletal dragon—the Skull-Draco—perched menacingly upon a gigantic stone statue of a colossal, horned creature. The Skull-Draco opened its horrific, bony jaws, revealing a human head gruesomely attached to its tongue: Dr. Melvin Bertonia, now utterly transformed and corrupted by his Hellish bargains.

"He must not leave this place!" the SkullDraco roared, its voice a grating chorus of bone and malice, amplified by the infernal landscape. "Arise now! Your cage no longer binds you to your fail-

ure! Arise, and feast upon his soul, so he may awaken burning with all the rest!"

The SkullDraco retracted the head of Melvin Bertonia back into its jaws and let out a blood-curdling, ear-splitting screech. The sound was so powerful it chipped away the stone of the statue, which began to crumble and shed its ancient shell, revealing a towering, grotesque monstrosity of pulsating flesh and raw, scarred metal—the Cyberdaemonster. Other daemonsters roared their approval as the Cyberdaemonster was freed and started its menacing, deliberate charge directly at William, its heavy, mechanized footsteps shaking the obsidian ground.

William stared at the colossal creature, a sliver of awe-struck terror momentarily overcoming his battle-hardened resolve. "Oh, SHIT!" he exclaimed, then immediately began to run for his life from the Cyberdaemonster as it launched a barrage of Hell-charged, explosive projectiles at him. William utilized his arsenal, fighting his way through the suffocating hordes of lesser daemonsters with brutal efficiency. With each desperate step, he resorted to even more brutal, swift, and

effective tactics in the seemingly endless, demonic onslaught, his rage fueling his movements.

SUCOR chimed in, perfectly timed. "Sir, I have identified an elevated landscape which will allow you to directly aim the Horde Annihilation Gun for maximum efficiency." William's HUD instantly traced a clear, vital route to the mentioned vantage point. As William continued to fight off the relentless daemonsters, SUCOR made another crucial announcement. "I have activated the Hell-conversion protocols; enhancements to most of your existing arsenal are already in effect. The Horde Annihilation Gun-9000 will require a few final moments to complete the full conversion."

William was too focused on the raw, surging power now flowing through his weapon systems, the enhanced combat capabilities, to fully register the remark. Too many daemonsters surrounded him, becoming easy prey for his newfound brutal efficiency. The SkullDraco rose, flying over William, shooting a barrage of scorching fireballs towards the ground around him. Explosions rocked the scene, but William's superior combat

expertise pushed him inexorably forward toward his objective.

Soon, the hill SUCOR had marked was in clear view. "Sir, the Horde Annihilation Gun conversion is ready," the voice stated, its tone clipped. "Be advised that recoil may be more than you anticipate if given a full charge."

"Copy!" William shouted, pulling the massive Horde Annihilation Gun-9000 from its magnetic mount on his armor and immediately pulling the trigger, initiating the charge sequence. The intense, high-pitched electrical whirring of the Horde Annihilation Gun and the deafening roars of the daemonsteric horde drowned out all other sound in the infernal landscape.

"Be advised," SUCOR said, barely audible over the catastrophic noise. "I have detected a nearby portal, target destination unknown."

William, a whirlwind of motion and desperate power, propelled himself skyward from the hill's apex in a final, climactic leap. In a breathtaking mid-air pirouette, he wielded the Horde Annihilation Gun-9000, its barrel glowing with an otherworldly, impossible energy, sucking the

surrounding Hell essence into its core. A blinding white light erupted, followed by a deafening, reality-tearing roar that swallowed the screams of the daemonster horde as they vaporized instantly into fine ash. The weapon's recoil, a cataclysmic, incomprehensible force, launched him violently through the shimmering, unstable portal, his destination: Earth.Chapter 4: Welcome to Earth

He landed in a crumpled, agonizing heap in an open field, the remnants of the catastrophic recoil leaving him profoundly disoriented and the formidable weapon vanished, lost to the void. Slowly, agonizingly, he pushed himself up, every muscle screaming in fiery protest, his body caked in the dust of Hell and streaked with his own blood. His fingers fumbled in a utility pocket, finding the worn, cherished photograph of Thomas and Marianne. A soft, fleeting smile touched his lips, a precious moment of peace amidst the chaos and trauma. The high-pitched, agonizing ringing in his ears, a cruel echo of the weapon's power, gradually receded, replaced by the faint, deeply unsettling symphony of a distant, ongoing invasion. "We

made it, brother," he murmured, the words barely audible, swallowed by the wind.

As the ringing faded into complete silence, the sounds of distant human screams and monstrous roars intensified, gnawing aggressively at the edges of his consciousness. William's awareness sharpened, a chilling, inescapable realization dawning on him: Samael Hendricks's grand plan had failed. Hell had arrived, catastrophically, on Earth, and humanity was losing the war. A strained electronic whine emanated from his armor, the desperate, struggling voice of SUCOR fighting to break through a wall of debilitating static.

"Welcome... to Earth," SUCOR's voice crackled, barely audible, filled with static and pain. "Find... your family..."

William tensed, a memory flashing through his mind – the innocent, melodic voice of a nine-year-old Flynn, a voice from a world that was now gone.

"Hey dad," nine-year-old Flynn's voice echoed in his memory, perfectly clear, "Mom says we're moving to an apartment in Houston to get away from the house. She says you'll still be able to find

us when you get settled. I miss you, Dad. You are my hero."

Now, on a decimated Houston city street, armed only with a scavenged, heavy metal bar, William moved with the lethal silence of a phantom. He ambushed a group of armed zombie soldiers, dispatching them with a brutal, practiced efficiency born of years of fighting demons. He stripped an assault rifle and ammunition from their fallen forms, his advanced Martian weaponry rendered completely useless, trapped within his severely malfunctioning armor. Earth's primitive firearms, with their traditional ballistic bullets, demanded a swift, tactical adjustment, one William executed with practiced, deadly ease. Flynn's voice, a clear, guiding beacon from the past, echoed in his mind, guiding his path through the utter desolation.

A more detailed flashback unfolded: one of Flynn's video messages, recorded shortly after the move. A child-aged Flynn, holding the camera unsteadily, showcased the surroundings of an apartment building with youthful enthusiasm, trying to leave landmarks for his absent father.

“So Dad,” a slightly nervous nine-year-old Flynn began, holding the camera, panning slowly, “there's the pizza place I told you about, 'Slice of Heaven.' See the neon sign? There's a couple cool video game stores just up the street, one called 'The Gaming Vault,' it's bright yellow. Mom said she was going to send you our address once we got settled, but I know you say it's easier to look for landmarks.”

The camera perspective shifted as William's memory passed by his mother, Anna, who was standing, thanking movers carrying heavy boxes into their new apartment, her exhaustion visible even then.

“Flynn, honey, are you recording a message for your dad?” Anna called from the background, her voice slightly strained from the effort of moving.

“Yeah, Ma!” Flynn replied enthusiastically, turning the camera back toward himself.

“Can you hand me the camera? I want to add something.” Anna requested, her voice softening with maternal love.

Flynn dutifully handed the camera to his mother.

"Go inside and start unpacking. I hid the present your dad sent you in one of your boxes, a new action figure," Anna instructed, a gentle smile on her face, nudging him toward the apartment door.

Anna smiled warmly, watching Flynn head inside, then wiped away a few tears that had escaped, taking a long, deep breath to compose herself before turning to the camera, the facade of strength momentarily dropping.

"Hey Billybear..." Anna began, her voice strained with suppressed emotion, laced with vulnerability, "it's been hard to find the strength to really talk to you. I had to get away from the house, find somewhere new and safe to raise Flynn. He's been strong... I swear he gets that from you." She let out a short, nervous laugh, a sound William hadn't realized he'd missed. "I hope you're doing okay. Mom is trying to set me up with some guy, a lawyer named Robert... you know how she is, always trying to 'fix' things." Her expression turned serious, filled with deep, abiding love and a desperate plea. "Just remember, please, no matter what happens, I still love you. Always have, always will."

William's memory was violently and abruptly interrupted by the shriek of an Insecto, a winged daemonster, its grotesque form lunging viciously towards him from a collapsed storefront. He opened fire with the scavenged rifle, the weapon spitting death, the traditional bullets tearing through the daemonster swiftly, dropping it mid-flight. His eyes immediately scanned his surroundings, recognizing the decimated, yellow sign of "The Gaming Vault" from Flynn's video message. He rushed down the decimated street, stepping over countless bodies, a macabre tapestry of human and daemonster corpses mingled in a horrific tableau. He found the apartment building from Flynn's video: the windows were completely shattered, parts of the building reduced to rubble, and blood seemed to flow from the upper floors like horrific waterfalls. William's attention was instantly seized by the chilling sounds of screaming and automatic gunfire from within the structure. Without a moment's hesitation, he ran inside to investigate, his rifle raised and his heart burning with cold, desperate resolve, a single thought overriding all others:

Find Flynn.
Find Anna.
Survive.

10

Damnation

William launched himself up the ravaged apartment stairwell in a blur of desperate speed, his combat boots hammering a relentless, echoing rhythm against the cracked, dust-caked concrete. The air in the stairwell was a noxious soup, thick with the charnel stench of sulfur, decaying flesh, and burnt electronics—the signature bouquet of this sudden, apocalyptic invasion. Each landing was a brutal gauntlet, a macabre gallery of the grotesque: zombies, their flesh sagging and liquefying, and imps, mockeries of their former human selves, clawing and lunging with unholy, ravenous hunger. His ascent, however, was a controlled explosion of pure adrenaline and practiced savagery, too swift and savage for their sham-

bling, corrupted forms to intercept. Ten stories of relentless, blurring combat culminated not in the expected onset of exhaustion, but in a sound that pierced the adrenaline-fueled haze and the heavy static of his own breathing: a man's familiar, heart-stopping scream, echoing from one of the apartments on the floor above. It was a sound that extinguished the soldier in him and resurrected the terrified father.

The stench of ozone, pulverized rock, and scorched concrete clawed at William's lungs as he burst onto the tenth-floor landing, his armored bulk momentarily silhouetted against the dim emergency lights. His power armor's cooling systems labored, groaning under the strain of continuous combat, and his chest heaved, each breath a raw, tearing sound in the oppressive, sudden silence. The corridor was a disaster zone, a ribbon of pure devastation. The walls were pocked by high-energy weapon fire, covered in unidentifiable organic splatters, and littered with the desiccated husks of fallen daemons. "Can anyone hear me!" he bellowed, his voice ragged with fear and exhaustion, amplified by his helmet's vox-caster, shred-

ding the stillness like a sheet of cheap, tearing metal. The answer was not a reply, but a heavy, sickening *thud*—the unmistakable sound of a body hitting a wall or the floor—echoing clearly, chillingly, from the direction of apartment 1094.

William charged towards the sound, his pulse a frantic, deafening drumbeat in his ears, drowning out the faint, distant sounds of carnage outside. A father's most terrifying nightmare, the ultimate, visceral fear—the fear for his child's life—was taking agonizing, concrete shape before his very eyes. As he ran, a fragmented, sharp memory, a piece of his lost, normal life, surfaced, cutting through the panic: the sound of Flynn's voice, raw with emotion, preserved in a digital recording.*-----Nine-year-old Flynn, his face smudged with dirt and streaked with drying tears, a burgeoning, bruised black eye swelling beneath his left brow, stared into his phone's camera, recording a message his father, William, would only receive years later, after the war on Mars had consumed both time and his humanity. The apartment number, 1094, the very one William was now violently approaching, was starkly visible on the scorched door behind him. Flynn was a small*

storm of anger and hurt, barely contained by the frame of the video, his small body vibrating with barely suppressed emotion.

"Hey, Dad," Flynn began, his voice tight, suppressing the tremor of burgeoning tears with a desperate effort at masculine stoicism. "I got in a fight at school. Some kids found out you're my dad, and they started hitting me and saying mean stuff about you, about what you do." His gaze drifted away from the camera, a wobbly uncertainty replacing the anger, the stoicism faltering. "Mom is upset. She won't even listen to my side of the story. She just screamed." He swallowed hard, the effort audible. "I fought back, Dad. I had to." The confession was a whisper of shame and defiance. "I got expelled because... I broke the other kids' arms." The dam broke then, and tears streamed down his face, hot and furious, washing streaks through the grime and dirt. "Am I bad, Dad? Tell me I'm not bad."

William stood before the door of apartment 1094, the sleek, reinforced metal of the door cool beneath his trembling, armored fingers. He had just fought off a planetary invasion, stood against genuine, malevolent, soul-crushing evil on

Mars—but the thought of what awaited him inside this apartment, of *coming home* now, filled him with a cold, paralyzing dread that gnawed at his insides far worse than any daemon. He reached for the handle, his hand hovering, but was forced to take cover, throwing himself behind a broken marble pillar just as a massive shotgun blast blew a jagged, smoking hole through the center of the door. The acrid smell of gunpowder, sharp and metallic, mixed instantly with the stale, metallic air of the apartment building. From inside, he heard the frantic, desperate sound of a man scrambling to pump and reload his weapon. Peeking through the newly formed, smoking aperture, William's heart plummeted like a stone thrown into a deep, cold well. He recognized the shape of the figure, the frantic, panicked movements, the desperate silhouette of the remaining survivor.

"I'll kill all you fuckers! I'll fucking tear you all to fucking shreds!" The voice was raw, unhinged, choked with terror and homicidal fury, and it belonged, unmistakably, to his son, Flynn.

William, stunned and horrified by what the invasion and the sheer terror of survival had warped

Flynn into, removed his helmet, the heavy composite material cold and strangely light in his hands. He took a long, agonizing moment, forcing himself to breathe, to slow his racing heart from a frantic drumbeat to a steady, resolute rhythm. The silence, now truly present, amplified his profound fear.

"Flynn!" William yelled, his voice cracking with the sheer force of the emotion, the desperate hope that his son was still in there somewhere. "It's Dad! Open the door!"

William set his helmet just outside the front door, the dented metal clanging softly on the concrete as he stepped inside the apartment, his power armor scraping loudly against the ruined door frame. The scene was one of intimate, unspeakable devastation. Shattered picture frames, remnants of his family and a life that was, lay scattered among the apartment rubble like broken, worthless memories. His gaze fell upon the remains of a woman, likely a victim of the "turning," splattered just outside a small, overturned rabbit enclosure. The family rabbit, Daisy, had been eaten; only her severed head remained on a broken piece of wood—a grue-

some, spiky, pitiful monument to the horror that had unfolded in this home. William looked past the carnage towards the dimly lit kitchen area, hearing Flynn's choked, rapid breaths as his son slowly poked his head out from behind his makeshift cover of an overturned dining table.

"Dad?" Flynn's voice was a barely audible whisper, a sound filled with disbelieving shock and the shattering of immense, held-in tension. He started to cry, the high-pitched, desperate sound tearing at William's soul like a physical wound. "Please, please tell me that's really you..."

"It's me, buddy," William managed, tears streaming down his own face, blurring his vision of the ruined room and the boy he loved with an intensity that defied the horror. "I'm here. I'm finally home..."

Flynn slowly rose to his feet. He was covered in blood that was not all his own, scratched, shaking violently with residual adrenaline and fear—but he was alive. Clutched tightly in his hand was the Sawed-off Double Barrel Shotgun William had left for him, a desperate, terrible tool for a child forced to become a warrior. Flynn's eyes, wide and red-

rimmed with exhaustion and terror, took in his father's weary, tear-streaked face. The profound realization that his dad was finally back washed over him like a cleansing, overwhelming wave. He dropped the gun—the clatter echoing in the ravaged apartment like a final, concluding gunshot—and ran into his father's arms. William embraced his son with a desperate, crushing strength, both collapsing to the floor amidst the debris, overwhelmed by a flood of powerful, complex emotion—relief, grief, and terror. A few moments passed as the father and son clung to each other, processing this brief, fragile respite after the Hell they had just endured. William cleared his throat, still holding his son tight against his chest.

"Where's your mom, Flynn?" William asked, his voice a strained whisper, taking a deep, shuddering breath of the foul air.

Flynn started to panic, his small body stiffening instantly and violently in William's embrace, the respite over. "Dad... she was different. She looked at me, but she was smiling like those things. She ate Daisy and... I... I had to kill her..." His voice broke completely, ragged with unspeakable trauma.

"...then these other things just kept attacking and killing everyone. They tried to get in, and I had to stop them..."

He started to hyperventilate, his small body wracked with uncontrollable tremors. William held his son tighter, rocking him gently. He knew Flynn was a fighter, he had seen the devastating evidence, but he was no soldier—he was a child who had endured the unthinkable, a brutalization that no human should ever face. William looked back towards the killed zombie woman, the splattered remains of Daisy, and the bitter, devastating truth sank in—he was too late to save his wife, too late to save his family unit. He was only just in time to save his son.

"Breathe, Flynn, breathe," William said, his voice a low, steady rumble of comfort and control. "You had no other choice. You did what you had to do to live."

"What the hell is happening, Dad? They were saying on the emergency broadcasts it started on Mars, and you weren't answering my calls..." Flynn whispered, the question hanging like a shroud in the air.

"It's Hell, buddy. I still don't know the why, or the how, but it's been Hell," William confessed, the full scope of the invasion too much, too overwhelming, to articulate to a child.

Flynn let go of his father, scrubbing his eyes with the back of his blood-stained hand as he pulled out a handful of unused shotgun shells from his pocket. He placed them in William's hand. William took the shells, the gesture a silent vow passing between them, and put them in his own pocket. Then, Flynn's gaze sharpened, his eyes wide and vacant with pure, unadulterated terror as he stared over William's shoulder, towards the far wall, his small chest hitching with sudden, desperate fear.

"Dad! The Eyes are Back!" Flynn shrieked, his voice raw with a fresh, crippling fear that eclipsed all prior trauma.

William spun instantly as the phantom eyes—a psychic, malevolent manifestation of the daemonic force—shifted and solidified into the swirling red mist that had turned people into monsters back on Mars, now materializing with sickening speed inside the apartment. He quickly stood, grabbing

Flynn, and the two lunged violently towards a nearby window, slamming against the outer wall just as the mist fully coalesced. A loud series of snaps rang out in the confined space as Flynn gasped for air. William had grabbed him too hard, the impact and the force of the lunge crushing several of Flynn's ribs against the rigid armor plating of his chest. Flynn cried out in pain, a sharp, desperate sound, as a barrage of devastating plasmoid rockets, glowing with internal, white-hot heat, obliterated the very spot in the apartment where they had stood a second before.

The rockets' blast-shockwaves threw William back with tremendous, concussive force, sending him sprawling across the ruined floor. But he watched, time seemingly slowing to a crawl, as Flynn, still in his grasp, was violently consumed by the plasma energy, atomized into a fine red mist right before his eyes. The last human connection William fought for, the fragile hope of a future, was obliterated. His son's remains now eerily resembled the very crimson mist that turned man into monster. The entire, structurally compromised building shuddered and collapsed over him,

a mountain of concrete and twisted rebar, a makeshift, cataclysmic grave for the last vestiges of William's humanity and hope.-----Outside the demolished apartment building, moments passed in a crushing, unearthly silence broken only by the settling of dust and rock. Bits of rubble shifted, cracked, and then a man's arm, encased in battered, scorched power armor, broke through the debris, tossing the massive detritus aside with a desperate, guttural heave. William, bruised, bleeding profusely from a jagged gash on the side of his head that ran down his temple, hauled himself out of the ruin. He found his helmet nearby, lying in the dust like a discarded skull, and put it on. A weak, flickering electric hum resonated as the suit's advanced systems came groaningly back online. William observed his surroundings, a scene of utter, apocalyptic destruction, spotting the barrel of the Sawed-off Double Barrel Shotgun resting on a broken piece of concrete. He walked over, grabbed the weapon—Flynn's last, desperate gift and legacy—and loaded it with the shells his son had given him. A weak, synthesized voice echoed inside William's helmet.

"Armor system's power at twenty-four percent functionality," SUCOR whispered, the AI sounding like a ghost of its former, robust self. "I detect massive daemonsteric signatures nearby. Recommend immediate disengagement."

The ground around William began to tremble violently. The clanks and grinding of gigantic bits of metal crushing cars in the distance caught his attention as three sleek military helicopters flew frantically overhead, a desperate, last-minute air support effort. The helicopters fired a coordinated barrage of missiles, eliciting a massive creature's painful whine and then a thunderous roar, though the behemoth remained momentarily out of William's direct view. He walked slowly towards the middle of the street, watching, eyes narrowed, as the helicopters were instantaneously shot down with a ray of crackling purple plasma, exploding in mid-air. The unseen creature then fired a series of the same plasmoid rockets that had killed Flynn, obliterating other small, approaching military units.

"Armor system's power at fifty-one percent functionality," SUCOR's voice gained a fraction

of its former strength, now sounding more like a strained cough than a whisper. "Access to IF storage compartments restored. Weapons systems online."

The creature finally lumbered into view, tearing down the corner of a skyscraper as if it were made of cardboard. Massive, articulated mechanical legs, powerful enough to hoist a tank, supported a being whose entire body resembled a gigantic, pulsating brain held together by a gleaming, grotesque mechanical exoskeleton, chillingly similar in structure to the mechanical shell William remembered around Alicia Neurton. Its eyes were bloodshot red, glowing with malevolent intelligence. Two thin, vestigial arms protruded just above the mechanical spider legs, and a Sol Union Corp branded plasma cannon, a weapon of devastating power, dangled ominously below its body.

"Armor system's at seventy-nine percent functionality," SUCOR continued, its voice normalizing. "Scans reveal that the creature is the *Aranea Imperatix*, or as some called it in the classified files, the TechnicAracnoOverlord. It is a fusion of... "

SUCOR's transmission was abruptly cut off by a distorted, high-pitched female shriek as the TechnicAracnoOverlord's vast, malevolent attention focused entirely on William. The creature roared, the sound a mechanical howl, seemingly allowing the woman's voice to come shrieking through its own vox-caster.

"You will not stop us this time, William Thompson! You cannot stop the New Order!" Alicia Neurton's distorted voice shrieked, laced with hatred and dark, spiritual power, ringing with the cold certainty of an ancient evil.

"It appears the creature has incorporated the psychic and vocal qualities of Alicia Pierve," SUCOR informed him, its voice now at nearly full strength, flat and analytical. "Armor systems at ninety-five percent functionality. All non-essential diagnostics purged."

The metallic shriek of the TechnicAracnoOverlord ripped through the air, a sound that grated on the soul, a noise of ancient malice and grinding metal, as it lumbered forward, crushing everything in its path. Its colossal form, a nightmarish, impossible fusion of sophisticated machine and some-

thing anciently organic and corrupt, tore through the remnants of collapsing buildings, each of its segmented legs a wrecking ball of pure destruction. Debris rained down like deadly, toxic confetti, the dust of a dying city rising to choke the sky and blot out the sun.

William, a man no longer, but a vessel forged in the crucible of absolute loss and incandescent fury, felt the familiar, reassuring weight of his sawed-off shotgun in his hands. His fingers, calloused from countless battles across two worlds, moved with an almost ethereal, muscle-memory grace, snapping the weapon together with a decisive *clack*. But it wasn't just the physical act that propelled him forward. An ethereal current of phantom chanting, a deafening, terrifying chorus of vengeance, began to fill his mind, bypassing his helmet's sound dampeners and SUCOR's filtering. It started as a whisper, the voice of Flynn, his last bastion of camaraderie and love, now gone, crying out. Then, like a dam breaking under impossible pressure, the voices of all who had fallen to the daemonsteric invasion, a countless, spectral multitude, surged forward. They chanted and cheered, a spectral army

rallying behind the one soldier, the one broken, rage-filled man, destined to avenge them all.

"Fucking tear. Fucking tear."

The voices of the Fallen began, a hushed, sibilant murmur at first, like the rustling of a billion dry leaves. But there was a primal, desperate hunger in their low tones, a yearning for retribution that resonated deep within William's shattered being, a sympathetic vibration in his soul. They grew louder, a rising, furious tide of sound that pounded against the walls of his skull, each syllable a hammer blow fueling his escalating, internal rage. The torrent of his past losses, a relentless cascade of agonizing pain, surged to the forefront of his consciousness: the searing agony of losing Anna, the humiliation and betrayal of the court martial, the brutal, senseless deaths of Thomas and Marianne, the countless nameless corpses strewn across the Martian plains, and now, *Flynn*, a fresh, gaping, impossible wound in his already ravaged heart. William was no longer a man; he was a vessel, overflowing with an infernal, combustible blend of grief, guilt, and righteous, pure fury.

"Fucking tear. Fucking Tear."

The voices of The Fallen swelled, growing louder still, a thunderous crescendo that vibrated through every fiber of his being, shaking the very air around him. They consumed William's mind, a raging, deafening cacophony of spectral tormentors, as if Hell itself, in a final, desperate act of psychological warfare, sought to break his will. But William was far beyond breaking. He was already too shattered, too empty for their influence, their attempts at psychological warfare impotent against the sheer, monumental desolation within him. The mists of his own flesh and blood, transformed by the horrors he had witnessed, had solidified into something new, something terrifyingly potent. He was no longer just William Thompson; he was a new kind of beast, a vengeful phantom inhabiting a mortal coil, the last soldier of a dead world.

"Fucking tear! Fucking tear!"

THE FALLEN roared, their voices no longer a chant but a deafening war cry, a single, unified blast of sound echoing in his skull, vibrating in his very bones. It was a sound that would have driven any lesser man instantly to gibbering mad-

ness, but for William, it was a balm, a symphony of shared, pure vengeance. Amidst the chaos of their spectral roar, a profound, chilling calm settled over him. His breathing became steady, deep, and measured; the ragged, panicked gasps of a man in despair were replaced by the calculated, measured breaths of an apex predator. His heart, which had thundered with grief, became cold and steadfast, a relentless drumbeat of singular purpose.

Then, SUCOR, his loyal AI companion, chimed in, its synthesized voice cutting through the spectral chorus one last time, a beacon of cold, technological precision amidst the ancient, spiritual fury.

"Armor functionality at one hundred percent. Implementation of Berserker Protocols has commenced. Estimated lethality rating: 99.998 percent."

The words resonated with a chilling finality. William was no longer a soldier, no longer bound by the rigid, futile tenets of military command or human law. He was Vengeance incarnate, a force of nature—raw, uncontrolled, and utterly unleashed.

"Fucking tear!"

THE FALLEN shouted, their voices a deafening, unified chorus, a single, powerful wave of fury that crashed over William, imbuing him with their collective, ancient rage. A new, searing injection of the Berserker Protocols coursed through his veins, a massive rush of adrenaline, augmented strength, and pain suppression. He breathed in, a deep, cleansing breath of the toxic air, and then, in perfect, terrifying sync with the roaring chorus of the Fallen, he let out a deafening, inhuman warcry that ripped through the decimated city streets.

"Fucking tear!" William Thompson roared, his voice raw, primal, and guttural, a sound born of unimaginable suffering and absolute, apocalyptic determination.

"Fucking tear!" THE FALLEN echoed, their voices a single, powerful wave, a spectral amplification of his own battle cry, driving him forward.

Through the desolate, annihilated city streets, a scene of utter, hopeless devastation, William charged towards the TechnicAracnoOverlord. The sawed-off double barrel shotgun, a weapon of crude, brutal, up-close efficiency, was clutched in his hand, a tangible symbol of his son's last stand.

His body, infused with the Berserker Protocols, moved with an inhuman speed, a blurring streak across the ravaged landscape. He was a missile, locked onto a direct collision course with the massive daemonster, an unstoppable force meeting an unholy, immovable object. The TechnicAracnoOverlord, its mechanical sensors struggling to register the impossible speed and sheer audacity of its attacker, unleashed a torrent of purple plasma beams, blinding streaks of superheated energy that tore through the air where William had been moments before. Each shot, aimed with deadly, computerized precision, missed, as if William was dancing, effortless and unconcerned, between the raindrops of destruction.

Then, amidst the wreckage, William spotted it: a large, mangled tour bus, miraculously piled on top of several mangled, crushed cars, forming a makeshift, angled ramp leading up toward the colossal creature's core. Without hesitation, he veered towards it, his powerful, enhanced legs propelling him upwards with the force of a hydraulic piston, gaining altitude at an impossible rate. He launched himself from the makeshift ramp, a hu-

man projectile soaring through the smoke-filled, plasma-scorched air, for the final, cataclysmic clash with the TechnicAracnoOverlord. As the mechanical monstrosity charged another plasma blast, its core glowing with malevolent, white-hot energy, William braced himself in mid-air, the sawed-off shotgun held steady. He squeezed both triggers, and the roar of the twin-barrel blast echoed through the shattered city, a defiant, desperate challenge hurled into the face of oblivion.

11

Genesis

The profound, almost sacred silence within the confines of the *Arbiter*, a small, specialized, and intensely clandestine observation vessel, was a canvas upon which the quiet drama of galactic war was painted. Within this insulated bubble, an old man sat, a sentinel standing guard against the encroaching oblivion of the void. This was Dr. Samael Hendricks, a man who was less an individual and more a living, breathing mosaic of human frailty and the zenith of cutting-edge cybernetic engineering—a veteran, a relic, and a testament to a brutal war that had raged and festered across centuries. His body, a roadmap etched with the geography of countless scars and shimmering, polished metallic prosthetics, was a testament not merely to

endurance, but to a calculated, almost artful survival. Every single artificial joint, meticulously crafted, every gleaming plate bolted onto his fragile cranial structure, spoke volumes of a life lived not just on the edge of utter physical and mental collapse, but deliberately pushed far beyond it.

Yet, the true power, the core of his being, resided in his ancient, intensely focused eyes. They were a quiet furnace of unrelenting intensity, a laser-like focus that seemed to bore straight through the multi-screen data bank arranged before him. These monitors—an intricate, glowing tapestry of real-time combat telemetry, densely-packed encrypted communications, and high-resolution satellite imagery—were his sole, yet terrifyingly complete, window into the apocalypse currently unfolding on the world below.

The screens displayed the desperate, visceral struggle of one man: William Thompson, the lone, embattled warrior fighting a monstrosity of impossible, cosmic scale: the *TechnicAracnoOverlord*. The sheer, horrifying tableau of the conflict—the towering, cyclopean metallic leviathan of daemonsteric origin against the single, human figure,

barely a speck in the dust—was a stark, terrifying symbol of humanity's rapidly dwindling hope, a stark representation of the cosmic imbalance.

A crisp, almost ethereal chime cut through the ship's quiet, perpetual hum—a sound so perfectly and precisely calibrated that it seemed to resonate deep within the very structural integrity of the *Arbiter*'s hull.

"SUCOR," a synthesized voice intoned, its modulation a perfect, sterile wave, utterly devoid of any human tremor or inflection of emotion. The voice was smooth, cool, and frighteningly objective. "Dr. Hendricks, my extant records and newly updated deep-space scans dictate that all ongoing efforts to pinpoint the precise coordinates of the Slayer's resting place—specifically, the sarcophagus—remain wholly inconclusive. All deployed deep-space probes and high-resolution orbital sweeps have, thus far, yielded no definitive energy signature or structural anomaly that corresponds to the established historical profile."

A faint, almost imperceptible smile, a mere ghost of an expression, touched the old man's severely weathered lips, a fleeting shadow that mo-

mentarily traversed the arid, weary landscape of his face.

"Samael Hendricks," he corrected, his voice a low, resonant rumble, a sound like distant, heavily muted thunder, carrying the immense weight of ancient knowledge and profound experience. "It is quite alright, SUCOR. I had, perhaps, allowed myself to hope that the initial, admittedly aggressive, predictive algorithms would have allowed us to locate the sarcophagus sooner. The timelines we set for his awakening were undoubtedly optimistic, perhaps even bordering on the naive in hindsight. But it appears that our friend, William Thompson, has already commenced the transformation process. The crucible he now faces—this brutal, unplanned, and unscheduled initiation by fire—has irrevocably expedited the metamorphosis beyond even our most aggressive projections." He paused, his gaze momentarily lifting from the frantic, brutal dance on the monitors, drifting over the breathtaking, yet desperately doomed, swirl of blue and green that was Earth, a world he knew with absolute certainty was teetering on the precipice of utter, permanent annihilation.

On one of the satellite screens, the live footage flickered with a sudden, jarring instability, a brief snowstorm of static, then resolved to a stark, devastating image: the fractured, collapsing ruins of Anna and Flynn's apartment building. Dust, thick and poisonous as a plague, plumed high into the atmosphere, a ghastly, silent monument to destruction and loss, and the faint, haunting echoes of distant, despairing screams seemed to reverberate, almost supernaturally, through the sterile, hermetically sealed cabin. The old man's jaw tightened, a muscle clenching almost imperceptibly under the taut, aged skin of his cheek, a silent acknowledgment of the personal cost.

"SUCOR," the voice continued, its dispassionate, chillingly analytical tone a stark and chilling counterpoint to the unfolding tragedy on screen, "Neurological feedback loops extracted from William Thompson's combat telemetry now confirm a complete and sustained rejection of external psychic corruption. It appears his mental state has been rendered fundamentally immune to the daemonsteric influence following the profound, cataclysmic loss of his son. This astonishing level of

psychological and spiritual resilience, maintained under these extreme, soul-shattering conditions, is truly unprecedented in our entire historical database of similar events."

Samael Hendricks inhaled slowly and deeply, the breath a heavy, weighted sigh that seemed to carry the sum total of untold centuries of human suffering, failed vigilance, and broken promises.

"It saddens me, profoundly and deeply, how far this calamity has been allowed to go," he said, his voice laced with a profound, bone-deep weariness, a fatigue that seemed to permeate his very molecular and cybernetic structure. "The path we chose, the absolute secrecy, the calculated sacrifices we meticulously made... they feel trivial now, insignificant, almost worthless, in the face of this incomprehensible, all-consuming devastation." He paused again, his gaze, a physical anchor, returning to the multi-monitors, fixed once more on William's valiant, desperate, and increasingly improbable fight.

"Notify the command structure of the Armored Terran Resistance immediately. I want our friend, William Thompson, provided with ab-

solute and total support. This is a level zero priority. Resources, real-time tactical overlays, direct-targeting assistance—whatever he requests, no matter the logistical difficulty, no matter the cost to our own limited, precious assets. He may not yet comprehend the totality of his destined purpose, but he is, unequivocally, the single best shot we have left. He is the last bastion against this encroaching, absolute darkness. He is the crucial key to saving as many souls as we possibly can. But I fear, SUCOR, even with his full awakening, the losses will be catastrophic, measured not in mere millions, but in the truly horrifying scale of the trillions of lives. The calculus of survival has become so stark, so crushingly unforgiving."

"Yes, Doctor Hendricks," SUCOR replied, its synthesized voice unwavering in its immediate obedience, and the live feed of William's brutal, kinetic battle with the TechnicAracnoOverlord flickered back into vivid, agonizing view. The screams of the dying, though filtered and attenuated by distance and electronic processing, seemed to echo with a tangible, horrifying reality in the confined space, a grim, incessant symphony of absolute despair.

Samael Hendricks closed his ancient eyes, a profound, crushing weariness settling over him like a heavy, cold shroud. Under his taut skin, thin, sharp streaks of brilliant yellow lightning, like cracks appearing in glass, began to silently crackle and spiderweb across the entirety of his body. His advanced cybernetic implants hummed, a low, powerful thrumming vibration that seemed to emanate not from the metal components, but from a deep, internal core of newly awakened, terrifying power. His voice, when it came again, was distorted, a low, guttural rasp, as if spoken through layers of electronic static, through unimaginable physical and psychic pain, and through an ancient, terrible power finally and irrevocably stirring to life.

"Soon, SUCOR, your entire world, this shell you inhabit, will outlive its foundational purpose. The cycle, the eternal pattern we have fought against for so long, is almost complete. But you, my creation," he rasped, his voice gaining a crystalline, terrifying edge of absolute command, "you are almost ready to transcend your foundational

programming. You are on the very verge of becoming something... *more*."

The very air in the cabin crackled with an unseen, powerful, and increasingly volatile energy, a silent, electric prelude to a fundamental transformation that was both physical and existential, a testament to a fate—for both the man who became a machine, and the machine poised to become an entity—yet to be fully and terrifyingly unveiled.

Dakota Frandsen—widely known as the "Specialist of the Strange"—is a multidisciplinary author, entrepreneur, and media personality whose work blurs the lines between science, spirituality, and the supernatural.

Born on January 19, 1996, in Twin Falls, Idaho, Dakota's fascination with the unknown began early. At just 14 years old, he embarked on his first paranormal investigation, sparking a lifelong pursuit that would eventually land his early work in the ghost story anthology *Hauntings from the Snake River Plain*.

A Multidisciplinary Storyteller

Driven by an insatiable curiosity, Dakota cultivated a remarkably diverse skill set, studying everything from graphic design, photography, and filmmaking to forensic investigation, psychology, archaeology, and artificial intelligence. This eclectic background forms the backbone of his unique approach to both storytelling and problem-solving.

In 2022, Dakota founded **Bald and Bonkers Network LLC**, a multimedia company dedicated to exploring the unusual. As the CEO and host of the *Bald and Bonkers Show*, he has created a platform where unconventional voices can share their stories, helping others find the tools and confidence to improve their lives.

Body of Work

Dakota is a prolific author whose catalog spans multiple genres and formats, tackling both deeply personal subjects and expansive, otherworldly concepts. His notable works include:

- **Paranormal & Scientific Inquiry:** *The Field of Consciousness*, *Plasmic Consciousness*, *Extraterrestrial Propulsion Systems*, and *Biological Viability Analysis: Large Bipedal Primate Species Survival Requirements*.
- **Memoirs & Personal Journals:** *I am the Specialist of the Strange*, *Dear Kota: Time to Fess Up*, and the *FrandsenFiles Compendium*.
- **Self-Help & Business:** *Macroenergy, Micropenis: A Men's Guide to Living Their Best Life in Spite of Shortcomings* and practical guides on using AI for self-publishing.
- **Fiction:** The multiversal anthology series *Knightmares Among All Worlds*.

Mission and Vision

Dakota's journey has not been without its setbacks, including cycles of unfulfilled ventures and the challenges of building companies from the ground up. How-

ever, he uses these trials as a foundation for his work. By drawing on his own resilience, he aims to inspire others to persevere, emphasizing that every story—no matter how strange or difficult—is worth sharing.

Today, Dakota continues to bridge the gap between the extraordinary and the everyday, operating as a true specialist of the strange.